

Star Wars Genesis: Revolt

by Cyan

Category: Star Wars
Genre: Adventure
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 1999-12-28 09:00:00
Updated: 1999-12-28 09:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 12:09:58
Rating: T
Chapters: 1
Words: 60,371
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Part two to SW Genesis Beginnings End

Star Wars Genesis: Revolt

****Title:**_ Star Wars Genesis: Revolt_****
> Author: Jennifer R Embree
> Author E-Mail: webmaster@swgenesis.zzn.com
> Catagory: Series
> Keywords: luke, mara, cyan, genesis, chiss
> Spoilers: everything _except _ for the prequels and
NJO
> Rating: R
> Summery: Bereaved of Cyan's bond, betrayed by a
sister he trusted, Luke Skywalker finds himself a drift. With his
sanity waning, he is dragged down into a new world with the Maraheb
Assassins. Learning their ways he eventually finds himself on his
home world of Tatooine where a revolt is taking place. Seeing his
chance to get revenge on his sister, Leia Organa Solo, Luke takes up
their cause and leads them to victory after victory. As he descends
further and further into madness, the only thing keeping him sliding
over is the love of his wife Mara Jade-Skywalker, and a distant
voice. **
> Disclaimer: This story was written without the concent of
Lucasfilm, and this author is in no way affiliated with Lucasfilm or
any of its subsiteryary companies.Â Fanfix.com is not responsible for
the content within.Â Cyan is copyrighted by Jennifer Embree and may
not be used without his concent.
> Author's Note: Â This story would not have been as
good if not for the faithful bata readings by my girl Ivy and all of
the wonderful feedback from its readers. Â If you want to learn more
about _ Genesis_ the series (the few parts that aren't here yet,
anyway) and all the extras, head on over to my website at
<http://www.hyperjump.net/cyan/genesis>

> <p>

> Chapter I<p>

The shuttle reverted back to real space just in time for its hyperdrive to falter and die. Â The shields flickered and stayed on, but with just enough power to sustain one direct turbolaser blast.Â The shuttle's hull was smeared with black scorch marks from heavy fire; its sublight engines, fortunately, were in the best condition of the whole ship.Â They had come out of hyperspace just outside of the star system, it's yellow star sparkling and twinkling in the distance.Â It would take them hours to reach the system's only habitable planet, Coruscant, but after the harrowing journey they had just been through, the shuttle's captain didn't mind one bit.

"Don't you two worry," the former first officer of the dead Cragon battle ship, the _Threnody, said. Â "I'll get you to your new home." Â _At least that's what I hope , Harsa thought uneasily.Â He glanced away from the display to look at his daughter Wisp staring out at the new sight with utter joy and the pale boy who looked at things with a strange detachment as if he were only watching a holovid. Â He turned his eyesâ€"one pale blue, the other a vibrant greenâ€"to Harsa and seemed to say, _We're not there yet.____

Harsa turned back to his work, setting a course to the world that was the centre of the New Republic.Â The world where he was bringing the son of one of the Republic's most celebrated heroes. Â The world where he would give all the secrets of the Force to the Republic's military.Â The world where he would betray his people.

Harsa sighed and initiated their course, sitting back in his chair to wait. The hyperdrive had been damaged when Harsa escaped from a losing battle when Quarrcta di Donna's three battleships, _ Cragon's Pride, _di Donna's Legacy , and _Jedis' Requiem finally found the _Threnody. Â They methodically took out her entire set of formable defenses until there was nothing left for them to throw at their enemies but their bitter defeat.Â The Admiral in charge of the _Threnody, a human with a talent for torture named Tarckok, knowing that if he were captured he would suffer unbelievable torment of his own, had taken Harsa to the secret levels where the two children were kept.Â The human boy was the son of Luke Skywalker, their former prisoner, and Quarrcta wanted him badly.Â Tarckok had thought to use him as a hostage to escape certain death. Â But Harsa had previously betrayed Tarckok, and the only reason he still served the human was because he had taken Wisp and promised to kill her if Harsa didn't keep working for him. Â When Tarckok turned his back to him, Harsa took the chance and killed the Admiral, taking the two children and escaping in Tarckok's own personal shuttle.Â They made it to hyperspace, but not before taking heavy damage from Quarrcta's battleships._____

That was all in the past now, and Harsa had more pressing matters to attend to.Â Like getting the stolen research of the Force back to the Jedi so they could take proper preventative measures. Â There was nothing he could do at the moment to speed things up so Harsa

un-strapped and headed aft to play with the children. He was halted mid-stride when an alarm warned that a ship had just exited hyperspace nearby. Â Harsa directed the portside sensors towards the source of the disturbance and sank into his chair again with shock. Â _Jedis' Requiem had somehow managed to follow them here.Â Quarrcta was so desperate to keep the Jedi baby and the research out of New Republic hands that he was willing to risk one of his favorite battleships by sending it to the very centre of their enemy's realm. Â Harsa knew he could not outrun the battleship, but he could try and make the incident as loud and as obvious to Coruscant's sensors as he could.Â Perhaps they would see the battle and send someone out to investigate. Â It was a slim chance, but it was Harsa's only option besides suicide._

—

Swinging the shuttle into evasive maneuvers, Harsa shunted full power to the rear deflectors.Â He heard a click behind him but ignored it; unless something else broke it did not concern him.Â He broke hard to port, then down, then to port again, hoping to confuse _Requiem's gunners.Â Then an ion cannon blast skimming by the view port proved him wrong. Â He was about to slew the shuttle to starboard when a little hand reached up and made them pull up.Â Harsa shoved Ben out of the way and looked back at the screen just in time to see that if they had gone in the direction he had wanted too, they would have flown right into an ion blast.Â Harsa whistled in surprise—he hadn't realized that Jedi children developed their skills at such a young age.Â Suddenly Ben reached up and shoved the lever again, swinging the ship out of the way of another blast.Â Realizing Ben would be there whether Harsa wanted him to or not, he put the boy on his lap and concentrated on strengthening their shields and seeing what he could do about the hyperdrive._

—

Suddenly the com unit beeped with an incoming message. Â After hesitating for a second, Harsa slapped the switch. Â The deep blue face of _Requiem 's com officer appeared.Â He gave Harsa the calm expression of someone doing a hard job that had been done one too many times.Â "Commander Harsa, you are ordered by his lordship, Quarrcta di Donna, to allow your shuttle to be boarded so that you may be returned to your rightful place as an officer of honor in the Cragon Navy.Â He sends his further assurances that you will not be penalized for succumbing to the blackmail forced upon you by the disgraced Admiral Tarckok. Â He fully understands that you were only doing what any other loyal Chiss would do to protect your family." There was a pause then the com officer added, "He also sends his gratitude for saving the research and the Skywalker child from the _Threnody. Â Your foresight saved them from being destroyed along with all the rest of the unfortunate crew of that battleship."__

—

Harsa's brow furrowed.Â Quarrcta had forgiven him?Â But he had betrayed his people.Â He had tried to take the child and the research to the New Republic. Â He would have ruined any chance of the Cragon Dynasty catching the Republic and the Empire by surprise. It was a trick, of course. Â Quarrcta just wanted to get the Jedi baby and research with as little fuss as possible.

Harsa was reaching for the switch to turn the com off when suddenly Ben somehow shut down the shields!Â Harsa smacked Ben's hand away from the controls just before the shuttle came to a shattering stop, caught in _Requiem's tractor beam.Â Harsa was thrown forward, inadvertently crushing Ben between him and the control panel. Â He sat back and turned the boy around to make sure he wasn't injured. Â Seeing he was fine, Harsa's gaze was caught by Ben's sad and resigned one.Â Harsa looked out the view port and saw the slowly expanding view of the _ Requiem irrevocably drawing them closer and closer to her dark belly.____

"Do you even realize what you've done?Â They'll kill me, and make your life a living hell!" Harsa said, giving Ben a useless shake.Â Ben shook his head and looked up at Harsa with brilliant eyes, and then, amazingly enough, he spoke!

"Da come!"

Harsa blinked in surprise.Â "What did you say?"

"Da come! Da come!"

"Da?" Harsa asked. "What the hell is a 'da'?" Â Ben's small pale brow furrowed.Â Then his eyes lit up again and he reached into his baggy shirt and pulled something out.Â Harsa took it from him and gave the child a puzzled look. "How in the All did you get your father's lightsaber?Â Waitâ€"of course!Â 'Da' as in 'dada'. Â I should have known.Â You mean he'll come for us?Â He's alright?" Â Ben seemed to think about it for a second. Â Then he nodded emphatically.Â "How can you tell?"Â Ben gave him a sour glare and took the lightsaber back. Â "I guess that means they won't kill me outright. Â And that would make this our best choice . . . Alright, you win."

Harsa turned back to the com and opened the channel after he had put the human child on the floor.Â He flicked the switch and said, "Tell Quarrcta I except his gratitude and give my renewed allegiance to him and the Dynasty."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"He's alive, Han!Â I know it," Mara Jade-Skywalker said emphatically.

Han Solo stopped walking to the kitchen of his home in the Imperial Palace of Coruscant to take his sister-in-law by the shoulders. Â He looked her in her eyes and stated firmly, "We'd all like to believe that, Mara, but it's not true.Â You're just going to have to accept the fact that Luke is dead and no amount of self-delusion is going to bring him back to life." Â Han sighed and ran his hand through his graying brown hair. Â He wore his usual vest but he refused to put his Correllien blood stripes on his pants since the death of his best friend Luke Skywalker. Everyone was in mourning, and shock, from the traumatic way he had died. Â Han had always known, in a way, that Luke would never die of natural causes, but he had never in his wildest nightmares suspected that the Jedi Master would lose his life through an act of insanity. Â The horror of the event would live

with him through the rest of his days. The absolute fury in his brother as he finally gave in was something he never wanted to see, nor ever again in anyone. The destruction that unleashed fury had wreaked, not just in Luke's death but in tearing apart a good chunk of Coruscant's richer district, was still being cleaned up. Not even the combined power of all the Jedi on Coruscant could stop him, there just wasn't anything anyone could have done differently to make things end another way.

Or so everyone else believed. Though no one blamed her, Mara put the whole incident on her back. Even now she looked far different than her usual neat appearance. Her red-gold hair tumbled about her face, straying from the loose ponytail she had attempted to put it in. It fell in front of her jade flecked eyes, failing to succumb to her attempts to brush it out of the way. She was dressed in the kind of no-nonsense body suit she favored, but the material was rumpled and her face lined with worry and lack of sleep.

"It's not self-delusion!" Mara insisted, shaking Han's hands off her shoulders. "I can feel it. If Luke were dead, the bond between him and I would have been broken, just like with Cyan, right?"

—

Han sighed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Well I can still feel the bond through the Force. He can't be dead," Mara said, as sure of her words as she was that she was still alive. Han looked her in the face, saw her conviction and gave up.

"Alright, you win. He's alive," Han said warily, knowing that look and knowing that even if she was wrong she was going ahead anyway. "Then where is he?"

Mara grinned and rubbed her hands together eagerly. "I don't know exactly where he is, but I think he's still on Coruscant. It's obvious he's wounded, so he's probably still near the hangar." Mara gave Han her best pleading expression. "I need someone who knows the area. It's either you, or Lando, and I like you more."

"Mara! You don't even have to ask," Han said, surprised. "Just let me eat my breakfast and we'll get right to work. But I think we should get some others to help. He more than likely headed down, and I'd rather have a few people with me when I'm in the lower levels."

"No argument there. Don't worry about getting others, there's plenty of people who want to help out," Mara told him.

"

"So what exactly are we looking for?" Corran Horn shouted from atop the pile of rubble. It had taken some cajoling, but Mara had somehow managed to convince the company that owned the hanger to leave off the repair work until they finished a final search. Han had come of course, along with the rest of the Jedi on Coruscant; Kyp

Durren, Cilghal, Dorsk 82, and others.Â Corran Horn, though in actuality a fully trained Jedi Knight, was an X-Wing jockey in Rogue Squadron. Â He had been away with the slowly forming task force that was to chase after the Cragon battleship, the _ Threnody, when Luke finally lost his mind. Â They were to rescue Ben Skywalker, since his continued capture matched with Luke and Mara's kidnapping by them was seen as an apparent act of war. All capital ships were called back to Coruscant after the "Battle of Wills" since the whole incident had created a massive uproar among most of those worlds that had a Jedi mediator on them.Â Though most acted with outright shock, some had deported all Jedi inhabiting them immediately, fearing this would become a trend. Â Corran was due to leave in two weeks as part of an escort to protect Leia when she went to several worlds to negotiate readmitting the Jedi. Â Then they would be heading for Tatooine where rebellion had broken out only two days earlier over water rations. Until then all Corran had was mission simulations and a lot of free time._

—

"A hole, Corran," Mara said warily.Â "If Luke is still alive, he couldn't be here since this place has been scanned up the Ying Yang for life signs. Since I'm pretty positive he was under here at some point, he had to have found some way out. Â He didn't just teleport to some place."

Corran shrugged and started wandering down the hill, picking through the rubble. Â "Alright.Â Just thought it would be more productive if we knew what to look for. Â But why are we bothering with this? Â If we all agree he went down, then why are we looking here?"

"Because when they were still searching the place there was a lot of supports and tunnels he could have taken to the lower levels, most of which didn't come out at the same place.Â We could search down there forever and never find him," Han said. Â "How long have you been living here, anyway?"

"Ha, ha," Corran growled, moving to an overhang.

Ejila Starbust called up from where she knelt near the base of the pile. Â "Hey!Â Wouldn't someone notice if Luke left here?Â And the hole too?"

"Not really," Cilghal said.Â "They were just looking for life signs, they wouldn't have noticed a hole since the falling rubble could have made it naturally. Â Besides, the place was all but deserted at night."

"I suppose, but if that's true, then how are _ we supposed to spot the hole?" Ejila asked. Â Cilghal thought about it for a second then shrugged._

—

"How 'bout you use the Force?" Han suggested, lifting a rock. Â "You could just sense that he'd been there, right? Â His residual presence or something like that?"

Mara lifted an elegantly shaped eyebrow.Â "Yeah, that's about all we

can do if there's no other signs. Just call someone over if you find a hole, Han."

They picked through mound after mound of ferocrete for the better part of two hours, finding several holes that no one thought were it. Then, just as even Mara was beginning to wonder at the continued usefulness of this exercise, Han found Luke's way out.

"Here's one! And, uh, I'm pretty sure this might be it," he added as Kyp jumped down to his level.

"How do you know?" Kyp asked then stopped when he saw what Han had noticed earlier.

"There's blood all around it," Han said needlessly. "And it looks pretty much like it's human." They all gathered around; they were positive they knew who had come out of it. Blood smeared handprints rimmed the entrance, with footprints and indistinguishable marks as well. Conveniently enough it led to one to the passageways still in place. "I guess we start looking there."

U n a n s w e r e d Q u e s t i o n s
> <p class="MsoNormal"> Chapter II<p>

Luke stumbled down the offshoot of the dark and musty passageway he had been slowly inching along since well before sunrise. He tripped for the last time and fell hard on his knees, clutching his skull even harder then he had before. He gasped deeply, trying to clear the deep, pain laced fog that threatened to overwhelm him as it had at the hanger. Every part of his mind screamed in agony. He wanted to use the Force to heal himself but every time he tried to reach out, the pain escalated to new heights. He sobbed and pulled his body upright against the wall. He had to keep going, escape the pain and anguish that refused to abate. He started to inch his way forward again, using the wall to support his failing body. Eventually he found his way blocked by an increasingly recurrent specter.

Cyan sat there, once again the innocent baby with the glittering crystalline eyes. His bronze scales sparkled dully as they slid over his small, lithe body. His ebony horns were just barely grown; his ridge lay flat against his neck. He crooned, the sound an embodiment of his grieving expression.

"Stop it. Stop it. Go away. You're not here, you're gone. Gone . . ." Luke moaned and closed his eyes against the sight. When he opened them again the dragon was no longer there. He sighed in relief and started walking again. He didn't know where he was going, nor did he care anymore. He just knew he had to get away. As far away as his exhausted body would carry him. He couldn't see very well, the light was dim and he couldn't focus his attention on anything. He stumbled again and again until finally when he looked up, all he saw was a dead-end. A dead-end . . .

He let his head sag back to the soiled floor, curling into a fetal position. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping death would come and end this pain, but then opened them again, on impulse. What he saw made him close them again and curl into a tighter ball.

"You have to go back, Luke," Cyan's soothing voice cooed. "You

can't run forever.Â Please go back.Â This will end all the sooner if you do.Â Please, please listen to me!" Luke thought he felt the brush of Cyan's palm on his damp cheek, soft as a warm memory.

A crash and someone crying out disrupted the moment. Â Luke opened his eyes and saw a Bothan dressed in clothes too expensive to be owned by a resident of these lower levels. Â He crashed into a waist disposal unit and fell to the ground, whimpering and pleading for his existence.Â Luke pulled himself to his feet again, unnoticed in the dark corner. Â The Jedi was so intrigued by the Bothan's appearance he didn't even realize Cyan had disappeared again.

Suddenly the Bothan let out a shriek of fear when something in the passageway caught his attention.Â A creature entered dressed in clothes that were baggy and black, so much so that they completely concealed its sex and species. Â Luke crept forward, knowing even without the Force that the creature in black would refuse the Bothan's pleas for his life. Luke felt his natural tendency to help kick in when he realized he was defenseless. Â Bereft of the Force or a weapon, he would be easy pray.

_ So what? What do I care if I live or die. Â The same fate waits for me on both sides .Â He saw a paracrete pole sticking out of a pile of knocked over refuse.Â He moved slowly towards it._

_

The assassin moved across the debris littered floor like a wraith, smooth and soundless.Â It pulled a stylized dagger from some hidden location and held it in an accustomed, balanced grip. Â It brought its hand back as if to slice the blade through the cowering Bothan's throat.

Luke darted forward, surprising himself with the level of agility he still seemed to possess.Â He grabbed the pole and swung it at the stunned assassin. Â Even caught off guard, the creature moved fast. Â It ducked out of the way then grabbed the pole as it swung past, yanking hard.Â Luke went crashing to ground again.Â He kicked out and caught the assassin in the leg.Â The creature stumbled, but stayed up; the distraction was just enough time for Luke to force his aching body to its feet. Â The assassin took a swipe with the blade, slicing through Luke's shirtsleeve and meeting with flesh.Â Luke gasped in pain and used the Force to _ push the assassin away from him.Â The creature slammed into the wall, at the same time Luke clutched his head, the pain caused by that simple maneuver threatening to overwhelm him._

_

"Run!" he gasped at the stunned Bothan.Â He needn't have said it for the Bothan had already started running for his life.Â Luke's vision began to dim, and he couldn't focus enough to stay standing, the coordination that required seemed to have left him.Â The floor rose up to meet him halfway, and then he blacked out, the last thing he remembered was lying on his back with the assassin looking down on him from above.

"Maybe he didn't go this way.Â Maybe it was one of the other passages," Ejila suggested.

"No," Mara said with a firm shake of her head. "He came this way, I'm sure of it." They had stopped for what seemed to be the millionth time at a cross section of tunnels that spidered through the level. As before Mara would pace back and forth, looking at each passageway, until she found one that felt "right". This now was taking a longer and longer amount of time the deeper they went.

On top of that Corran was getting more and more irritable the deeper they went too. He had been a member of CorSec, a security force on Correlia but had been forced to leave. He knew how to use the Force to track someone down but as of yet they hadn't found a single physical clue that Luke had gone this way and that rankled him. Unfortunately as stubborn as he was, Mara was far sturber. So they kept on going, down, down into the vary bowels of Coruscant.

"Do you have any idea how close he is?" Corran asked. "How off the pace are we?"

A small crease appeared between her brows as Mara thought about it for a moment. "He's—he's not far."

"Oh, that helps," Corran muttered.

"You know, you didn't have to come if you didn't want to," Han growled, getting fed up. "And you can go back anytime you want."

Corran shrugged. "I want to help. But we have no evidence beyond the Force, and even though Wedge will go for that, not everyone over my head will. I got sims in two hours and it's gonna take me an hour just to get back to the base."

"Then I'll yell at anyone who tries to get you in trouble for it," Mara told him. "You can't get in trouble for doing a favor for a Jedi Master."

—

"That's what I'm hoping."

"Alright, stop your complaining then. I think he went this way," Mara pointed in a direction and they started down it. They walked. And they walked. And then they walked some more. They chatted, made some suggestions, but nothing happened. They met very few people; most creatures that lived on these levels feared strangers. On their way they past a terrified Bothan. He babbled something about a monster coming after him and a strange man who came out of nowhere to help him. The group exchanged glances and the Bothan snarled and took off. They wandered by an offshoot of the main passageway, one of many they had past throughout the search, when Mara suddenly stopped. She backed up and looked down it, thinking to herself.

"What is it?" Cilghal asked. "Did Luke go down there?"

"He couldn't have," Corran said, "It's a dead end."

Mara shook her head. "No, no he was here. For a little while."

But somethingâ€¦something happened."

"Look," Han said, reaching down to pick up a paracrete pole. Â There were bloody handprints all over the base.

"There was a fight here," Corran said, moving in and inspecting the area. Â "There's stuff knocked over, some blood on the wall and on the ground right here.Â And look, some fresh footprints in theâ€"uh, whatever that stuff is on the floor right there."

"Looks like you got your hard evidence, kid," Han commented. Â "Well, obviously Luke ain't in as bad condition as we all thought. Â He must have survived the fight."

Jenab Rohib, a quiet student who made few comments but those he did make were usually good, spoke up.Â "But wouldn't his body just disappear if he was killed? Â Like all the other Masters?"

"His clothes don't disappear.Â I don't see them anywhere," Ejila put in.

"She's right.Â And he's not dead. Â I'd notice," Mara commented.Â Then her face fell.Â "He's not here, he's gone.Â We won't find him down here anymore.Â We lost our chance."

"Where did he go?" Dorsk 82 asked.

"I don't know."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"Yes of course I understand your concerns but this is an isolated incident. Â Master Skywalker's . . . explosion as you call it was a result of a combination of problems he was involved in. Â He has been in stress inducing situations all throughout his life and never needed counseling before.Â This was as much a surprise to his close friends and family as it was for anyone."

"Was that supposed to reassure me, President?" The high pitched, scratchy voice of Wallatalla's Viceroy asked. Â "Because all it said to me is you have no warning and no way to predict when this will happen!"

Chief of State Leia Organa Solo sighed in exasperation.Â She had spent the better part of two days soothing over agitated representatives from planets spread throughout the New Republic and even a few in the Empire. She had wanted to get out of it, but some worlds just would not be pacified without the President's personal assurance. Â Of course no one thought about what she was going through. Â Wasn't she under enough stress?Â Her brother just died a horrible death; she should be in mourning not in negotiations.Â But no, they had to hear it from her, the President of the New Republic, who also happened to be a Jedi as well.

She decided to try another tactic.Â "Viceroy, if a senator were to suddenly have a psychotic breakdown, would you suddenly start worrying that all the other senators would start having psychotic breakdowns?"

"Well, no. Â Of course I wouldn't.Â But I don't seeâ€"

"Then why should it make any difference here?" Leia demanded. "Master Skywalker's break down was caused by events that would have destroyed an average person, but since they are unordinary in occurrence and random in order I do not think we have to worry about it happening to all the Jedi."

The Viceroy thought about it for a second then growled in grudging acceptance. "When you put it that way it makes me sound stupid. I suppose that's the best reassurance I'll be getting. Fine, but if anything happens, I'm holding you responsible." He stood and Leia rose with him, extending her hand. He looked at it, curled his lip, and swiftly exited Leia's office. She sank down in her self-conforming chair again, rubbing her temples.

"One more down, who knows how many to go," she commented, a slight tremor slipping into her voice.

"Fifty seven," C-3PO, her golden protocol droid informed her from behind the chair. "Or fifty six if two headed persons only count as one."

Leia laughed lightly, resisting the urge to ask Threepio which species he was referring to since she knew she would get a rather large list of two headed entities along with their cultural differences and how they divided personalities. She sat back in her chair and rubbed her eyes wearily, picking up a data card containing the profile on the next representative she would be seeing.

"Are you feeling alright, Mistress Leia?" Threepio asked.

"Yes," Leia smiled forcibly again and gave a short laugh, "yes, I'm fine. I'm just tired, that's all. I-I haven't been getting enough sleep since—" Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes and leaned her head back, taking a deep, calming breath. "Not getting enough sleep wasn't quite correct. More like she couldn't sleep for the nightmares that plagued her. Who's next, Threepio?"

—

"Emissary Gi Si of Vecoom VIII," Threepio said after a moment's pause to consult his memory banks. "His world is still functioning under the dual Jedi guardian probation period since they are still recovering from a civil war with their fourth moon. Though, at the moment I do believe the two Jedi assigned there have been . . . deported."

"It's Gi Si? Great, he probably had a fin large enough to knock his dorsal fin off. Ugh, you know what, Threepio? I'm too tired to put up with his bull right now. I'm taking a break," Leia said, rising and striding from the room.

Threepio seemed quite surprised at her abrupt departure and called just before the door to her office slid closed behind her, "Is that what I should tell the Emissary?"

Leia walked swiftly down the hall, ignoring the sideways glances her swift stride and angry expression attracted. She reached a deserted

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to watch out for potential members?"

"Not Jedi, you doorknob! Â They don't agree with killing!"

"I didn't recognize him, ok?Â The light was dim and he came out of no where.Â All I knew at the time was he put up a pretty good fight even though he was injured."

"Remhada's gonna have your ass stuffed and mounted on her office wall with all the others that displeased her, Pendad.Â And I'm not gonna get pulled down with you."

"Oh, well thanks for the support, Seefi."

"We could always just kill him."

"I wouldn't mind if you did, unless you got a really good pain killer on you," Luke moaned, opening his eyes and looking at the two figures arguing above him. Â The one on his left, Pendad, had his hood pulled back to reveal a pale, human face.Â With startling blue eyes, his features looked like they had seen too much blood at too young an age.Â Luke narrowed his eyes for a second, fairly certain he was the one he had fought in the passageway. Â Then he looked at the other.Â Seefi was a slim woman, a Vooak, her reptilian face covered in red scales. Â Her cold green eyes narrowed; the yellow slits that proved to be her pupils dilated.Â Her sinewy tail curled and twisted about her, ending in a single wrap around her arm, tapping irritably.Â

"Great, now he knows what we look like.Â Which means we _ have to kill him," Seefi snarled, her forked tongue darting out angrily. Â "Of all the wrong people in the galaxy you could drag in here, you bring the one I'm least inclined to kill for free!"_

—

Luke let his head fall into his hands and groaned.Â "Well, now that I feel really special, could you get on with it? Â I'll do it if you're squeamish, just give me a weapon."

"I'm not squeamish, darling, I just don't like killing good people.Â I try and have some principles," Seefi purred, perching on the metal slab Luke was laid on and smoothly drawing a vibro blade.

"And you've already witnessed every one of them," a voice called softly yet firmly from the doorway.

Seefi purred again, but this time she sounded nervous, not amused.Â The Vooak jumped off the slab and turned off the vibro blade, cringing slightly before the figure that had just entered the room. Â Pendad followed suit, offering a bow that would have been grand had he not already been crouching.Â Luke turned to look, the only outward sign that this new visitor caused him any interest.Â She was tall, taller than Seefi, at the very least six foot three.Â Her dark almond eyes sparkled with cunning, something her stunning body might make one forget—fatally so.Â Her skin was creamy brown, her hair black with emerald green highlights. Â She lifted one slender eyebrow, racking her eyes up and down Luke's beaten body.Â Her full blood red lips parted with a slight smile.

"I am disappointed, Pendad. You usually show more courtesy than this. Run and get the medic to see to Master Skywalker's injuries," she instructed, her rich voice speaking with an out of place kindness. Now it was Luke's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Such consideration from a member of the Maraheb," he commented. "I'm impressed."

—

Her eyes lit up and she gave a single clap. "Oh, congratulations! I never would have thought a Jedi Master would have been so well informed of our organization."

"Well, let's see, my brother-in-law is a smuggler and so are more than a few of my friends, and my wife not only was one of them, but she used to be an assassin herself. Doesn't speak to kindly of your organization, I'm afraid," Luke commented with mock sadness.

"Yes, well, we don't have a great deal of respect for personal assassins here either," the woman said, clasping her slender fingers together and slowly walking towards him, her every movement reminding Luke of some feline creature. "But we will concede that your wife was one of the better ones. So sad to see her go. We were going to induct her but she proved to be too loyal. Such a pity."

Luke rolled his eyes. "I'm sure."

"Of course. Pendad, why are you still here? I told you to get a medic," the woman said disapprovingly. Pendad jumped in surprise and more than a little fear and swiftly moved out a door Luke had not even noticed was there.

Luke turned back to the woman with a perplexed expression. "So who is the person who strikes the fear of death into those who yield death itself?" he asked.

"I am Remhada, that is all you need to know about me," Remhada said. "Unless you except my offer, then I believe you will learn a great deal more."

Luke's eyes narrowed. "And what kind of offer is this?" he asked.

"The kind that will benefit us both," she said reassuringly. "I sense in you a need to cause death, something that is totally foreign to you in many respects."

"I have killed many times before."

Remhada nodded to concede the point, then began again. "But this is different. I have been doing my job for a long time and I can tell when someone does this willfully or not. And I think you are just looking for a good reason."

Luke's eyes narrowed even more and he felt anger rise within him. Who was this woman to assume she knew him so well? And who was she to tell him what he wanted to do?

"I know you don't just want to go out and murder everyone you see.Â You've regained too much of your sanity at the moment to want to do that," Remhada commented.Â Luke frowned, trying to remember what she meant by that. Â He tried to think back to what had happened at the banquet that might have spurred that comment . . . and he couldn't remember the end of the banquet.Â He frowned harder, knowing _something major had occurred, but still he could think of nothing._

—

"But I do know there is one person you do want to kill.Â All of Coruscant and most of the rest of the galaxy knows who you want to kill. Â After that rather public explosion of yours I don't see how they couldn't," Remhada moved to sit on the slab beside him and curled her elegant finger to lightly tickle his chin.Â "If you stay here, you can kill her any way you want. Â You will have all of the _Maraheb behind you.Â It is the one thing all our members are given in exchange for their services."_

—

Luke swallowed and leaned back, away from Remhada's hand.Â "Don't you think I'm a little too well known to be an assassin? Â If I come in contact with any Jedi they'll sense that at the very least I can use the Force and they would be duty bound to come after me. Â And it's rather difficult to get a Jedi off your tail."

"Yes, we've discovered that the hard way in ancient times when there were more of you. Â It was difficult then since there were Jedi everywhere. Â But we were better known then, a name to be whispered with the greatest of fear," Remhada murmured, her voice low with bittersweet reminiscence. Â "Now there are not so many Jedi, as you well know. Â So if we have a case where Jedi may be involved, we wait until they are no longer around to take care of it.Â We know that killing a Jedi would be putting us at risk."

"Which is probably the only reason I wasn't killed outright as soon as you came in the room," Luke commented.

Remhada shrugged. Â "It was one of them, but there is something else. Â Our fighting style has become old, outdated, predictable. Â If there were anyone who knew it as well as one of us, we would have trouble.Â The Jedi on the other hand have a fighting style all their own, as varied in each of you as the stars.Â If you could teach us, add your knowledge to ours, then we would have something new and unique."

"You want me to help you make one of the most skilled assassin's guild in the galaxy even more skilled?" Luke asked, incredulous.Â His lip curled in disgust.Â "Do you realize that goes against every moral fiber in my body? Â Not to mention every ideal I have tried to teach since I was twenty years old?"

"Well, yes, I do realize that it will take some adjusting.Â But just think, you can teach them more humane ways to do their work. Â Some of our techniques are crude and painful by necessity. Â Perhaps you can find a way to lessen their effect," Remhada mused out loud.

That did it for Luke, he burst out laughing at the very thought. "I just fell off the edge, lady, I didn't jump head first! The thought of me helping you to fine-tune your instruments of death is laughable! Besides, even if there was someone I wanted to kill, I want my own death too much to wait." Now it was Luke's turn to lean close as he said seriously, "Someone with a death wish is no good to you. I would have no urge to work even if I weren't wholly morally opposed to everything you're suggesting. Besides, most of what I know is based on the Force. Not everyone can use it you know."

"But you _ would have something to live for! That person you want to kill!" Remhada exclaimed softly. "We both know who it is. I know what happened that broke you, I can put two and two together. _ She killed Cyan. I also read the medical file on him, and it said that a new rider/dragon pair would be chosen the moment you two were separated. Don't you want to protect whoever that is from suffering as you did? It'll probably be a Jedi so you'll know them. Would you really wish this kind of pain on someone you love and cherish?"

—

Luke's brow creased at her words. He knew he was being manipulated, and very deftly at that. Mara had always said it was one of his weaknesses. Mara . . . what if she was the next chosen? "They'll be looking for me," he said finally.

"Ah, but everyone thinks you're dead except for your wife. And even she seems to have given up all hope of finding you," Remhada answered.

"I . . ." Luke turned away from her, his mind suddenly spinning. How could he even be considering this? It should be an easy choice. Just say no and get on with it. It would be the end, it would be all over and he could go on to the other side. Cyan was there, and so, so many of his friends and family. He looked around the room, trying to buy time before he had to answer. Suddenly something glittered in the corner, catching his eye.

"Luke don't do this!" Cyan moaned, coming out of the shadows. He stopped half way and reach out a tiny adolescent paw. "Please! Run for the door! You can make it. Go back to Mara! She'll help you get better, then everything will be all right. I promise! Don't do this, I don't want you too."

Luke glanced at the door, calculating the distance between it and the metal slab. He might be able to make it, but could he find his way out once he was through the door? Suddenly he growled and shook his head. He must really be unstable if he was actually listening to the voices in his head.

He turned to Remhada, his eyes determined. "When do you want me to start?" he asked, ignoring the wail of grief behind him.

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Mara cried out in fear, sitting up in the bed and hugging her arms around her while she caught her breath. Her hair straggled around

her head, matted with sweat. Â She rubbed the back of her hand across her damp forehead and looked around her bedroom in puzzlement.Â What had awoken her in such a state?Â She had the vague feeling that she'd had a terrible nightmare or premonition, but she couldn't remember what it was.Â She also wasn't sure whether or not it was over.

She threw the blankets to the side and wrapped the sheet around her. Â A part of her mind screamed for her to stay away from her door, and yet another part urged her towards it. Â Deciding she would rather get it over with if there were something there, she crept forward.Â She put her ear near the door and listened, using the Force to enhance her hearing to try and sense if there were any life forms out side, but she could detect nothing out of the ordinary.Â Taking a deep breath, fighting the feelings of trepidation, she hit the panel and stepped through the thresholdâ€

â€"Into the blaring sun of a vast desert.

There was speeders everywhere, and people hurrying about, recharging blasters, doing last minute checks on their speeders, holstering blast sticks commonly used to close-line someone on your way past.Â No one looked at her, or seemed particularly alarmed by her presence. Â If anything all she got were occasional salutes or nods of respect. Â Mara went to clutch the sheet closer around her and belatedly realized it wasn't there anymore.Â It was replaced by a tight leather outfit with a blaster on her belt along with a blast stick and a vibro blade strapped to her thigh. Â She put her hand to her cheek and felt her hair brush her fingers, and it hit her that there was a lot less of it then there had been moments before.Â She pulled a strand in front of her eyes and had to struggle to keep them from bugging out. Â Not only was there less of it, but it was now shimmering blue too.

"Are you alright, love?" Â This time Mara did jump as Luke rested his chin on her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her waist.Â "You look distracted," he added.

"Oh! I-ah-it's nothing. Â Just a little off today," Mara stuttered, groping for something to say that would fit.

Luke tightened his grip a little protectively.Â "You can stay behind if you want.Â Deak can coordinate the squadrons." He nipped her ear and whispered, "I know this war has never sat well with you, and I know you've tried to hide it from me all this time. Â It's all right, though.Â After this, I have a feeling it will all be over."

"Yes, I think you're right," Mara murmured, his words ringing a cold cord inside her.

"Thank you, thank you for coming here," Luke continued, pulling her as close to his body as he could, his words so low Mara almost couldn't hear them over the wine of repulsor coils. "You almost make me forget about that empty spot. Â It doesn't echo so much when you're around. Â I was lost without you."Â He pressed his cheek against hers and Mara clasped his hands in hers, feeling them tremble.

Suddenly they were interrupted by a siren screaming, sending everyone

around them scurrying for their speeders or gun turrets set up on a near by rise.Â Luke started running too, pulling Mara along and giving her a gentle push and a small slap on her butt before jumping on his modified bike and revving the engine.Â Mara gave him a surprised and appropriately outraged glare and got a grin and a wink in response.Â Rolling her eyes to the sky, she jumped on her speeder and blasted after Luke when he took off without waiting.Â She saw everyone else un-holstered his or her blast sticks so she pulled hers out too. Â They sped towards the hill and went over the crest . .

and once again she was sitting upright in her bed her hairâ€"still long and still redâ€"plastered to her face. Â She glanced around more than a little warily, not quite sure what to do with that dream.Â She was more than positive it was a premonition, but of what she had no idea. Â But it did tell her one thing; Luke was defiantly alive and well.

The question was where the hell was he in the meantime, and how did she get there?

"I wonder what it means?" Corran mused latter that week after Mara had described her dream. Â They sat in the Pilots Lounge with most of the rest of Rogue Squadron. Â They were being given a brief respite from their month long mission of escorting Leia and other mediators around to the different worlds outraged by the recent events.Â It had almost been two months since they had tried to find Luke, and Mara still had no idea where to start looking again.Â "By the way you described the landscape it almost sounds like you were near the Jundland Wastes on Tatooine."

"Hmm, or maybe you're just spending too much time in the simulator again," Mara commented, giving him a playful punch in the arm.

Corran grinned back and responded, "All the more reason I'd know if you were talking about it. Â Maybe that's where Luke went?"

"No, I can defiantly still feel his presence on Coruscant," Mara said, shaking her head. Â Â Â "Beside, I'm pretty damn sure there's a time gap between now and the dream.Â A lot of things seemed to have happened, not to mention the change in appearance."

Corran chuckled, "I wonder what you would look like with blue hair?"

"Oh, for the love ofâ€" " Mara began, cocking her fist to hit the cringing Corran in the arm again. Â She was interrupted by the sound of the door whooshing open and everyone in the room jumping to their feet to salute. Â Corran did the same but Mara just gave the arrival an unbridled look of disgust.

"Sit down," Leia said with a careless flick of her fingers.Â She strode towards Mara and Corran, every set of eyes following her as she went.Â Neither Leia nor Mara bothered to keep their rivalry secrete, and everyone else in the room could sense the mounting tension in the air.Â "I need to talk to you Master Jade."

Mara ginned at Leia's pointed refusal to add "Skywalker" onto the end of her honorary. Â The fact that she had put "Master" in there at

all suggested that she needed something.Â "But of course Princess Leia Organa.Â I serve the New Republic's will."Â Leia's almond eyes narrowed and she gritted her teeth, ignoring the fact that Mara had used a title she hated and at the same time suggested that she was unworthy of Han's family.

"I need you to select a mediator to come with me to Tatooine.Â Having a Jedi there might gain us some points with the revolting faction," Leia growled.Â Corran and Mara exchanged glances as if this was significant in some way. Â Suddenly Mara's face split in a huge grin.

"Then who better than Luke's wife and the Princess's sister in law!Â I've got nothing planned for a long while. Â It'll be great," Mara said with surprising cheerfulness.

"What?" Leia and Corran demanded at the same time.

Mara's grin widened, if possible. Â She sat back and crossed her legs, putting her arms behind her head. Â "Aw, c'mon sis, it'll be fun!Â Just you and me doing some good old fashion girl stuff while we save a world from civil war on the side."

"Mara have you, oh, I don't know, taken a large quantity of spice lately by any chance?" Corran asked warily.

"Not at all," Mara said with a shrug.Â "Besides, it would be nice to see where Luke grew up.Â You know, except this time without the intention of killing him for an evil dark side master and all that.Â It might give me some clues as to where he's gone."

Leia struggled to wipe the incredulous expression off her face and failed miserably. Â "Iâ€uh, sure, whatever," was all she managed. Â With that she swiftly fled the room.

"That was fun," Mara said with a satisfied sigh.Â "Maybe next time I'll give her an aneurysm."

"Her or me, whoever comes first.Â What was all that about, anyway?" Corran demanded, sitting back down.

Mara shrugged nonchalantly. Â "Well, if you're right and it was Tatooine I saw in my dream, then I'll need to be there eventually.Â When are you guys supposed to be leaving?"

"Ah . . ." Corran's eyes drifted as he thought about it.Â "'Bout two and a half weeks from now, I'd say."

"Good. Â That'll give me plenty of time to check something out before I go," Mara mused, nodding to herself.

"What?" Corran asked curiously.

Mara shrugged again. Â "Shada asked me to help out the organization until Karrde recovers. Â There have been reports of some _ Maraheb action in Invasec.Â Shada figured I'd be the best one to look into it given my former background."_

"Who are the . . . _ Maraheb?"_

—

"You've never heard of them?" Mara asked, mildly surprised. "I would think a former CorSec agent would have."

Corran replied dryly, "Apparently not."

"I guess so. Though I suppose it's not so far fetched. They've been around since the Old Republic was in its birthing pains and have been practicing the art of concealment for all those centuries," Mara told him. Her eyes darkened as she continued, "They are assassins, possibly the best assassins around these days. They're so good at concealing themselves it was said that a Jedi Master of old would be hard pressed to track them down."

"Then what makes you think you can catch them?" Corran asked.

Mara grinned again, but this time it was a grin of true excitement, the grin of a predator about to go on the hunt. "Because I've tracked them before. One of them was hired to kill one of Palpatine's 'close personal friends' so I was sent after them. Though sometimes I think the only reason I even caught up to them was because they wanted to induct me. As it was I never caught the guy."

Corran's brow creased. "Well, what makes you think you can catch them now?"

"Then I was an assassin with extensive tracking skills and a small ability to use the Force. Now I'm a former assassin with extensive tracking skills, decades of experience and pretty damn good Force ability. I'm not exactly worried about whether or not I _ will find them. It's what I'm gonna do _when I find them that's troubling me."__

—

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent">
 Chapter IV

"Get your arm up Seefi!" Luke growled as he ducked under her bamboo practice blade and struck the lizard woman a fierce blow to the side. She hissed in pain and tried to regroup and reorganize for a counter attack. She rushed in, hoping to catch him off guard but Luke saw it coming even without the use of the Force. He dodged to the side and jammed the hilt of his blade into her elbow on her way past. She shrieked in surprise and pain, but even as she stumbled to the side, Pendad, who had thought to follow Luke's attack and get her while she was recovering, was blocked from delivering a hit that would have surely ended her part in the sparing bout.

Though "saved" so to speak, Seefi was still too off balance to stay standing and she landed on the padded floor with an anticlimactic _flump . With the sudden absence of pressure Pendad stumbled forward and tripped over Seefi, knocking the wind out from his lungs as he experience a rather rough landing as well._

—

Luke stopped and looked at the two members of the greatest assassins

guild in the galaxy . . . and laughed. "I must say that was the most elegant thing I have ever seen!" he said, still laughing. In fact he was laughing so hard he found it difficult to stand up. Seefi and Pendad just lay there in a heap and glared laser bolts at him.

"Don't look so upset," Remhada said from where she lounged against the wall. "He has every right to laugh at this spectacle."

Luke, still chuckling, wiped a tear from his eye before adding, "My niece and nephews are more stable on their feet. Though in all fairness to Pendad, it was mostly Seefi's fault." He walked over and extended his hand to Pendad. "Seefi, you need to protect your face better. And you need to stop that habit of wrapping your tail around your neck and arm when you fight. You have it for balance, not decoration. Use it."

"Pendad, you have to stop putting so much weight into your strikes. You're not heavy enough to use that to your advantage. You go in, you get out, you wear your opponent down."

Luke finished helping Seefi up and glanced at Remhada. She was smiling contentedly to herself.

"What?" he asked.

"Just remembering what you said about not being able to teach us anything," Remhada commented almost proudly. "After looking at this I can see we have a lot more work to do."

"Speaking of which, when are we going to start my session? I'm ready to go now but if you want me rested before hand . . .," Luke's voice trailed off.

"No, we should start now. I hate procrastination," Remhada said, letting the silk robe drop from her shoulders as she stepped gracefully onto the mat. "Which is why I will be evaluating you on how you perform in this session to see if you're ready to go out on an assignment."

Luke shook his head. "I already told you I won't be doing anything of the sort. It's amazing that I'm doing as much as I am now!"

"Well, think of it as on the job training. Seefi and Pendad aren't the only people here who need work. And there are precious few left after the Clone Wars. A problem you are quite familiar with I'm sure," Remhada said, sliding a light vibro blade from a holster on the wall. Luke followed suit and they began to circle each other warily. Remhada added, "Besides, you wouldn't have to do any of the killing yourself. Just observe and make sure there is a minimum of mistakes."

"Inaction is just as bad as driving the blade in with my own hands, Remhada. I'm not going to do it!" Luke punctuated his sentence by suddenly moving forward and delivering a quick series of strikes, trying to see just how on her game Remhada was. She blocked and parried them all with her general ease and Luke moved back again, looking for an opening. Though the blades were set on such a low frequency that they would do no damage if they struck each other, it

still stung enough to give the right impulsion to avoid a hit.

Luke dropped his hand just slightly, at the kind of angle only inattention will put it at, and Remhada pushed herself off the balls of her feet to make the strike. Â Suddenly Luke's other hand was there slapping hers to the side. Â He turned with the blow and hooked his foot around her ankle. Â Remhada stumbled and almost fell, just barely managing to avoid Luke's follow up.Â She swung her blade in a wide arc, her lankier limbs giving her more reach than he did.

Then they both moved in at the same time, the blades fizzling as the stuck, the room resounding with the sharp slaps of flesh on flesh, grunts and quick breathing, the pattering of bare feet on the mat.

Remhada moved in quickly, expecting Luke to parry her strike so she could follow with her hand. Â But he missed, right in the middle of trying for a chest wound. Â Remhada's blade went through his wrist, stinging flesh and causing a brief paralysis in his hand.Â The blade slipped from his grasp and he hissed in pain, stumbling out of her reach.Â She moved with him relentlessly, kicking out at his leg violently, dropping him to the floor. Â He fell flat on his back and she brought her blade to his throat, straddling him in a tight grip between her knees to keep him from rolling away.

They stayed that way for a moment, catching their breath.Â Then Remhada leaned even closer to his face and asked softly, "Why do you do this?Â You agreed far too easily. Â I expected more of an argument."

"My reasons are my own, you don't need to know them.Â Just know that I'm helping you," Luke said harshly.

"That's not good enough, Skywalker," Remhada whispered, her face centimeters from his. Â "I want more and I always get what I want." Â She moved closer and suddenly Luke struck out, knocking her off him and feeling the sting of the vibro blade slicing across his throat. Â He choked but kept rolling until he was on his stomach and no longer touching her.Â Remhada landed on her side and she stayed that way, her narrow almond eyes studying him closely. Â He was staring at nothing, but suddenly she saw them focus on something in the unlighted corner.Â She had seen this happen to him many times, always when faced with the option of leaving.Â He looked stricken, then he shut whatever it was he saw out and grimaced.

She stood and came over, looking into the corner from his angle and stroked his head. Â She sensed rather than felt him tense at her touch. Â "What do you see, Master Skywalker? Â What foul vision does your mind create when faced with a difficult decision?Â You're never getting out of here without a good reason.Â Why stay faithful when the one you love has given up on you?"

"She hasn't given up," Luke whispered, almost cringing away from her hand. Â He abruptly sat back, stumbling over his own legs. Â "I'd know!Â I'dâ€"I'd feel it!"Â He looked in the corner again and his eyes widened as if someone had said something else. "No! Â Stop it!Â Stop it both of you!" He scrambled to his feet, only to trip over his own legs again. Â He succeeded on his second try, but only to back into the wall, clutching his head.Â Remhada stood with him,

amazed at the abruptness of the event. "She had expected him to break at some point but not so quickly and so suddenly." Then she thought about what he said and stepped closer.

"What do you mean 'both of you'?" "I'm the only one here, Skywalker," Remhada said softly.

Luke looked up, stunned. "He glanced at the corner nervously and said, "I didn't say there was anyone else here." I didn't." He stopped talking all of a sudden and ran both hands through his hair. "He looked steadfastly at the floor and took a deep breath. "We're done for today," he decided arbitrarily. "Remhada raised an eyebrow, unused to being told what to do. "This could be a problem." He looked up at her and after seeing the expression in his eyes, she decided that this was not the time to correct the problem. "With one last look in the corner, he left for his room, leaving Remhada to ponder his actions in silence.

Luke walked swiftly down the cold hall, ignoring everyone he saw on his way to his quarters, wondering how he had lost control so quickly and how he could react like that to a simple sparring session.

"You're acting on instinct," Cyan said sadly. "C'mon, we're guys. "Biological imperative is always gonna enter into our actions when we rely on our feelings to get us through the day."

"I'm not," he stopped himself and glanced around to make sure there was no one listening to him. "Seeing no one he turned around and glared at the baby bronze dragon. "I'm not relying on my feelings. "In fact I'm trying to ignore them as much as possible. "I wouldn't be teaching in a bloody assassin's guild if I were even paying the slightest attention to them. "Oh, and if anything, this is your fault."

Cyan sat back on his haunches, looking quite offended. "Me? "What did I do?"

—

"You tried to talk me into leaving! "I was going to do it myself but no sane person is actually going to _ listen to the voices in their head!" Luke exclaimed.

—

Cyan's sable eyes widened and he tossed his head in annoyance. "But you aren't sane! "Sure you didn't do what the voices in your head told you to do, _ this time, but guess what? "You're having an argument with a figment of your imagination! "Get out of here and get some help! "This is just as disturbing for me as it is for you!"

—

"Oh! God forbid my imaginary friend be disturbed!" Luke said, exasperated. "He started walking towards his room again, turning his back on Cyan. "Look, I got other things on my mind."

"Well obviously not as much as you're supposed to! "Take it from

something that came directly out of your head, you're missing some important stuff in there," Cyan growled.

Luke smacked the control panel and entered his quarters, snarling over his shoulder, "Shut up."

"Why, Luke?" Cyan asked, trotting around in front of him. "I'm right and you know it! We both know that that's the hardest part about this. But you can leave, go back up above. Mara will help you, she helped you before. She just didn't realize how bad you were. But now she knows."

Luke shook his head, kneeling to look Cyan in the eye. "Then you should understand why I stay here. There's something to focus on, something to keep me going. I can't face Leia, I can't even really remember the banquet because I was so out of control. I never want to be like that again. I could have killed Mara."

"But you wouldn't have, and you didn't, and for that matter who says you have to stay on Coruscant? Maybe you two could go to Dagobah and try to find some focus. Avoid Leia until you know you can control yourself," Cyan suggested.

Luke smiled sadly and scratched the imaginary character under the chin where he knew the dragon liked. Cyan purred exactly as he remembered; Luke felt his heart ache and Cyan crooned at his distress. Luke continued, "I am avoiding Leia. I'm doing everything you said except this way not only do I not put anyone else I love in danger, but I learn how to control this anger until I need it the most. I'll never use the Force again, that option is lost to me. But as Remhada said, 'Death is an art and we must learn to use all the mediums'."

"But why would you want death? It's not like you," Cyan asked, concern evident in his feline imitation of Luke's voice.

"Like you said, not everything is working like it's supposed to," Luke said dryly.

"Well, then you just proved my other point," Cyan muttered.

Luke frowned. "What other point?"

"You're reacting to your feelings and emotions if you stay for those reasons. You're still angry and hurt and all you want is revenge," Cyan looked up at him appealingly. "Please, won't you leave here? Save your soul before it's too late to turn back."

Luke tilted his head and smiled again. "Then as something that has come out of my head, you know it's already too late for that."

"So how is our Master Skywalker fairing?" Remhada asked as she strolled into the observation room.

"Just as well as we predicted, Director Remhada," the analysis officer said. He gestured to the view screen showing Skywalker in his room, down on one knee and apparently talking to something that didn't seem to be there. "As always he's talked himself into calmness again."

Remhada nodded, pleased. "Then she asked, "And what did our little test show you?"

"Exactly as we suspected. He's relying on instinct since he innately knows he can't rely on his own logic. His loyalty to his wife overrode the physical pleasure you offered him. Since the logical part of his mind seems to be impaired, the _ logical reasoning you tried to use to persuade him failed," the analysis officer explained._

—

"Anything else?"

The analysis officer nodded, his expression altering slightly to tell Remhada that what he had to say next wouldn't be good. "Given the increasing occurrence and abrupt nature of these episodes combined with the continued degradation of his neural pathways, I'd have to say he will be uncontrollable within six months, possibly less. We might be able to extend that date if he were to receive support from someone he trusts, but I don't think he'll be getting any of that here. At the moment his only contact with his conscious is through hallucinations. Strangely enough he's fully aware of the fact that they're not real and that he's slowly going insane. Given his character profile he should be doing more to fix it."

Remhada looked at the monitor and watched as Skywalker reached out as if scratching something. "Have you taken into account the events that led up to his illness? The death or separation of the creature called Cyan; he claims his sister killed it. If that's true then wouldn't his reliance on instinct lead him to stay with the option that would allow him to gain revenge?"

"That's one of our current theories. Though all our studies seem to point to a simple suspension in the mental bond, not severance by death. Of course, that doesn't change what Master Skywalker thinks to be true," the analysis officer shrugged helplessly.

"Do you have an operation timeline yet?" Remhada asked.

The officer nodded, handing her a data card. "Here. Keep in mind that this is all speculation and any number of outside stimuli could affect it. If you want to keep those numbers to a maximum keep him away from President Organa Solo at all costs. Any contact with her could trigger another 'Battle of Wills'."

"Only four months?" Remhada asked. The analysis officer nodded solemnly. Her brow creased ever so slightly with indecision. She thought briefly of perhaps kidnapping someone he trusted but quickly rejected the idea. Anyone she brought in would undoubtedly try and convince him to leave. "Tell me, would downgrading him to instructor again after say three and a half months extend his usefulness?"

"Make it just three and you might get an extra month. It all depends on how stressful his missions are. As I said, it's all speculation," the officer explained.

"Then tell me, how will I be able to lure him into operation if I cannot appeal to his sense of logic or give him the option of taking

out Organa Solo?" Remhada demanded.

The officer consulted another data pad before answering, "I would say send him out with agents Seefi and Pendad. Those are the two he has worked with most closely and given his natural over protectiveness all you'll have to do is hint that they're not completely ready to go out on higher-class missions. He'll want to see to their safety himself since he really doesn't trust anyone here" which is quite smart of him. In fact, if you lay the right amount of doubt on their abilities you will be hard pressed to keep him in."

"Anything else?" Remhada asked, less than happy with the options. "It won't work once he sees how far along they really are."

"Send him out on missions to kill people who have committed heinous crimes. As a Jedi it is his duty to make sure justice is served," the officer suggested.

Remhada shook her head, rejecting that idea. "I believe that would be more to logical thinking. Besides, didn't the medical report say that he could no longer use the Force?"

The analysis officer nodded, gesturing to the screen. "Yes, in fact he just indicated that he doesn't believe himself to still be a Jedi. But the fact that he is persistent in refusing assignments tells us that his morals haven't been completely compromised." The officer thought for a moment then indicated, "You might try adding some risk to one of his friends. Don't threaten them, just say that the target is after them. Or suggesting involvement with the Cyan murder/betrayal. Revenge is always a good spur to physical violence."

The crease in her brow deepened slightly as Remhada turned to leave. "I see. Well, if that's the best you have to give me, I'll be leaving. Thank you for your time, officer."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Mara ran down the deserted hallway, her padded feet making only a whisper of noise. Once she had left the main walkways in the "upper-subterranean" section of Coruscant, the _Maraheb's trail had all but disappeared. She was relying completely on the Force now, but that didn't seem to be hindering her. The sensations were so strong she knew exactly which turn to take, which door to use. She was also aware of an urgency in the air; wherever the Force was taking her, she had to get there fast._

—

She was unobtrusively protecting an executive at the time, a man who had received several death threats from a rival company suspected of using the _Maraheb. She had left the room for only a moment, but when she returned he was already dead from a precision wound in his chest. The assailants had already left but when she went out side she managed to find some traces as to which direction they had gone. They were slight, but easy enough to spot with the Force. The trail went lower and lower until it led right into the building she was now searching. It was an office, and still in use so far as she could tell, even though it was deserted at the

moment._

—

Suddenly there was a crash from down the hall.Â There was a set of double doors at the end that suddenly thudded as if something had hit them. Â Mara put new energy in her stride, all attempts at secrecy forsaken. Â Someone screamed in pain just as Mara reached the doors. Â She skidded to a stop and spun into a kick, her foot connected hard with the doors but failing to open them.Â Cursing, Mara pulled out her lightsaber and sliced a squarish hole large enough for her to jump through.

A sudden flash of intuition caused her to duck to the side.Â A wickedly curved dagger skimmed just past her ear. Â Mara sent a blind pulse of the Force through the opening she had made and was satisfied by the sound of someone slamming into a wall. Â Jumping though she saw three bodies, one dead in his chair, another sprawled across a conference table, and the last on the floor. Â The rest of the people, two humans, a Duros, a Bothan and a Rodian were backed into a corner, staring with stark fear at the hooded and cloaked figures moving towards them.Â There were three of them, two that had humanoid forms and another with a wicked tail lashing back and forth in excitement. Â The one with the tail was approaching with a dagger similar to the one that had been thrown at Mara.Â The two humanoids were looking at Mara now, one half turned towards their victims and looking like it was the one Mara had thrown against the wall, while the other was staring at her with wide eyesâ€”he was also unarmed. Â Mara reached out with the Force and pulled the dagger from the tailed one's hand.Â It clattered to the floor just as Mara leapt onto the table and dropped into a combat crouch.

"How about you be nice little assassins and stand down now.Â Then you can make me real happy by taking me to your base," Mara growled. Â All three of them looked at each other, then the unarmed one made a quick sign with his hand and they bolted for the wall. Â Mara glanced in the direction they were running and saw an open ventilation shaft.Â Jumping off the table she tried to slash at the unarmed one; he had paused to let the other two get in front of him before running himself. Â Anticipating her move, he ducked below the glowing blade and stopped abruptly.Â Her momentum made her pass himâ€”she tried to stop and turn to meet him but she stumbled over her own feet.Â The assassin moved in, grabbing her left hand and pressing down on a weak spot that was the result of an old injury.Â Crying out, Mara dropped her lightsaber and tried to pull away. Â The man kicked out, catching her ankles. Â She fell backwards, landing hard on a chair before rolling off on to the floor.Â She got a brief glimpse of his eyes before he followed the others and she was surprised to see regret in them.

She tried to get up but stopped when she felt a shooting pain in her back. Â She just lay there for a moment, assessing her injuries. Â She carefully turned her head to the ventilation shaft and just managed to catch sight of one of the assassin's feet disappearing through it.Â She knew she shouldn'tâ€”couldn'tâ€”get up, so she looked at the remaining people in the office and realized they had fled during her brief confrontation.Â Sighing, she slowly reached into her pocked and pulled out her comlink, wondering as she did why the unarmed assassin seemed so bloody familiar.

Seefi engaged the lock on the transport tube and turned around just in time to see Luke slam his fist into the wall. "Didn't that hurt?"

"Yes," Luke snarled, clenching his left fist and grinding his teeth. "The tube started moving, taking them through a randomly chosen rout to another tube that would take another randomly chosen rout to the base. "Who the hell was our informant on the first hit? They screwed up royally."

"It was one of our repeat customers, only a light check was done. They've never given us a bad hit before," Pendad said.

Seefi's tail curled around her waist nervously as she asked, "Who was that? Did you know her?"

Luke barked a laugh, "Of course I know her. It was my damn wife! And it won't take her long to figure out it was me who attacked her."

"Well, what are we going to do?" Pendad asked, also a little wary of Luke's sudden anger.

"Nothing. This is Remhada's problem. I warned her about this and she ignored me. So now she can figure out what to do. I didn't even want to come along," Luke growled.

They were all silent until they reached the complex. Luke sent Seefi and Pendad to their quarters, telling them that he would brief Remhada. Glad to be given an option to escape, they both turned and left, almost running in their eagerness to be away. Luke watched them go for a moment and then shook his head before smacking the panel on the door to Remhada's office. She was sitting on her desk looking at a data pad; she started at Luke's abrupt entrance.

"Master Skywalker! I have told you before that I would prefer you knock before you enter," Remhada said tersely, rising.

Luke stared at her for a second and then laughed. "Oh, give it up. I'd notice if you were having sex in here. Secretive people tend to broadcast though the Force, and you're no exception." Ignoring her shocked expression, he sat across from her and fixed her with a smoldering glare. "I hope you're happy. I think I just paralyzed my wife when she attacked us today."

Remhada's face paled visibly. "There were Jedi there?"

"Just Mara, but it won't take her too long to figure out who attacked her. We're as good as found _when she tracks me here," Luke growled._

—

"But you injured her. That gives us some time," Remhada said slowly.

"Not much," Luke responded, his eyes darkening with increased anger. "She'll be out in two days, maybe three. She tracked us easily enough to the second hit. I don't see why she wouldn't be able to track us here."

Remhada looked down at her desk for a moment and then a small line appeared on her brow. "What if _ you're not here?" _

—

"What do you mean?"

"What if I were to send you on an off world hit. Would she track us then?" Remhada asked.

Luke frowned. "No, I don't think so. But what do I do when she finds me?"

"Don't let her catch you," Remhada suggested dryly.

"Ha, ha. Where would you be sending me?" Luke asked.

Remhada smiled. "To a place no one would think to look for you."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"It's amazing just how many times you wind up in the hospital," Han commented as he walked into the recovery room. Mara was sitting on a bed with her legs thrown over the side, glaring at a two-one-be droid who was trying to keep her in bed. She looked up when she heard Han and grinned.

"Well, I figured that since Luke's not around to get the crap beat out of him, hospital staff would need something to do with all the spare time," she commented. The droid tried again to push her back in bed and she swatted irritably at its extender arms. "Would you use your diplomatic status or something to tell this hunk of metal to leave me alone? I'm fine."

Han shook his head. "You know, you're worse than Luke sometimes."

"Luke's the whole point, Han," Mara said eagerly, the droid forgotten. "I know where he is!"

"What? How?" Han asked, incredulous and now just as eager as Mara.

Mara grinned. "The assassin who attacked me. He knew exactly how to take advantage of my weak points. He had me down in less than a second! But he was reluctant to do it; I could see it in his eyes. And I just had this senseâ€|it was him, it had to be!"

"Aw, c'mon, Mara," Han said, his eagerness turning to skepticism. "Luke, an assassin?"

"I don't think anyone has ever pegged him as a psychotic maniac either but look what happened. I know I can track him, I did it before. I just have to get out of this damn hospital," Mara growled.

Han frowned for a second and threw his hands in the air. "I've believed worse, what the hellâ€"but we can start looking later. "

You got seriously injured Mara!â The doc said you were just about paralyzed!"

"You don't understand!â I think I have to do this quick, Luke's not going to be here much longer if I don't find him soon. Besides, by the time they let me out of here I'll have to go to Tatooine with Leia, and I gotta be there too for some reason," Mara said, exasperated.

"No, Mara, I can't.â If you do something else to piss Leia off I think she going to start restricting you movements," Han commented.â "And then you'll have no way to find him, even when you're physically able."

Mara raised an eyebrow and grinned.â "Didn't know I was being _that effective."_

—

"Thanks a lot, Mara."

"Sorry," Mara said sincerely.â "I know this is rough on you, but at least you'll be going to Tatooine with us.â I think we could use a mediator."

"You two could have used a mediator a couple of months ago," Han said dryly. â He took her by the arms and held her gaze. â "Just promise me you won't try and get out of here. â I have to go back and start working on the _ Falcon again if she's ever going to get off the ground and I have to know you're not going to take off."_

—

Mara stared steadily at him for a moment and then sighed in resignation. â "Fine, but the Force only knows what'll happen to Luke."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter V<p>

"I would hope that we can put our differences aside for this trip. â I want to solve this as soon as possible," Leia said from the first row of seats in the land speeder that was swiftly taking them to the capital building in Mos Eisley.â Han sat beside her with Threepio on the other side. â Mara sat in the row behind them with Chewbecca and Artoo hummed to himself on the floor.

Mara smiled at Leia's words and said calmly, "I am here only to make sure a fair and just deal is made.â Time is not an issue to me, nor should it be to you . . . if you have your citizens best interest in mind, that is."

"Of course I do," Leia growled.â "I just meant that the sooner this is resolved, the sooner these people can get the right amount of water to survive."

"Then you should change the quotas on that offer you seem convinced that Titati will except," Mara stated.

Chewie roared irritably and Han nodded, in agreement, half turning to

better see Mara.Â "No kidding, Chewie. Â Mara if you get any more patriotic, I'm sending you back to the sickbay to check for head injuries."

"Hey, I'm just filling in for Luke 'til I find him," Mara said sweetly.

Leia gritted her teeth and restrained herself from starting another argument about whether or not her brother was alive. Â "I wonder if they'll send The Fixer to the negotiations again?" she mused.

Mara gave a derisive laugh, "I don't think he'll bother if he knows what your offerâ€" "

She was interrupted suddenly by an explosion that rocked the speeder into the air.Â The occupants were tossed around as the speeder tipped up on its side, almost flipping. Â It came down hard, the force of its decent too much for the repulsor coils to compensate for.Â The bottom slammed into the compressed sand that served as Mos Eisley's roads, rupturing the hull.Â The human and Wookie passengers managed to get a handhold on something, and while Leia managed to grab Threepio, Artoo went clattering around the interior, screaming all along the way. Â Though many of the repulsors had been damaged in the initial explosion and the resulting impact with the road, there was just enough left online to stabilize.Â The driver opened the door to the rear passenger area and started to tell them to get out of the speeder but they were already opening the hatch.

Once they were on the street, they could better see the damage done. Â A crowd was beginning to gather. Â There was a small crater where the apparent mine had been set off. Â The hull had been peeled, and in some cases melted away to reveal the damaged circuitry.

The driver whistled appreciatively and commented, "Didn't think they would start hitting Mos Eisley so soon.Â There goes the neighborhood."

"What do you mean?" Mara asked, trading glances with the others.

"The Rebels," the driver said, gesturing negligently at the wrecked speeder. Â "They've taken over Toshi Station, and hit Mos Espa, Mos Eiap, and a couple of others I can't remember.Â Sure am glad you guys finally got here. Â I use to take a short cut through the Jundland Wastes, but no one who wants to live to see tomorrow, or at least keep his speeder goes that way anymore."

"I didn't know it was this bad," Leia said.

"Probably wasn't before you went on that useless trip to placate the other worlds," Mara commented in a low voice.Â Leia shot her a dangerous glance and then looked at the land speeder.

"I guess we're walking the rest of the way."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Luke slid his back against the wall, trying to ignore the all too familiar feeling this place gave him.Â It had been almost

twenty-five years since he had set foot in Toshi Station. ^ Even when they came here to find information on the Dark Saber crises he hadn't returned.^ Too many memories he'd rather not have.

He reached the room the informant said the hit would be in and he used the manual release to open it, keeping the noise of its opening to a minimum. ^ He entered into a spacious living room, not exactly what one would call neat, but sufficiently lived in so it didn't look trashed. ^ The table had a blaster riffle, a blast stick, and a long vibro blade resting on it.^ _ Must be a rebel, no self-respecting bounty hunter or smuggler would use a blast stick, Luke thought absently to himself._

-

He saw the bedroom door on the other side of the room and swiftly made his way over, careful not to disturb any of the soiled clothes or used dishes stacked everywhere.^ He opened that door the same as the first and was satisfied to see two sleeping figures in the bed.^ He was supposed to kill them both.

"You know, you should be helping these people, not killing them." ^ The sudden appearance of the dragon almost startled him into crying out.^ He stopped and pressed the palm of his hand to his forehead before glaring at the bronze creature. ^ Deciding to ignore him for now^"what a time for his conscious to act up^"he went to the other side of the bed to the woman who slept there. ^ It didn't matter if he killed them, they were probably just pirates or thieves looking for a decent cause for their lives.

"But what if you know them?" Cyan asked, following him to the other side of the bed.^ "You grew up here, and not many leave once they've worked here for a while. ^ You know that.^ Also, Han was a pirate once, and look at what he's become. ^ You believed in redemption not so long ago." ^ Gritting his teeth, Luke steadfastly kept going. ^ He wouldn't know them.^ It had been so long since he'd last been here, half the people he knew were probably dead or in prison.

He pulled out his own stylized blade, tipped with a fast acting poison so if he was immobilized somehow all he had to do was scratch the hit. ^ He pulled the blanket back as gently as he could, and swallowed. ^ This was it.^ Once he did this there was no going back.^ He couldn't understand why he agreed to take the hit himself, but something told him that he had to be here.^

He brought the blade back and then froze. ^ The woman had rolled onto her back, exposing her face. ^ She was attractive, though there was lines about her eyes and mouth and she looked like she had been in the desert a little too long without a shower.^ Her hair was black and cropped short around her head; her skin was tanned a deep bronze.

Luke jerked back and withdrew his blade.^ The movement was enough to wake the woman. "Camie . . ."

Her expression evolved from surprised, to frightened, and finally settled on outrage.^ "So they finally sent someone to kill us.^ Well, go ahead! ^ Prove that her Royal Highness wants to throw away democracy and make the New Republic just as bad as the Empire!" ^ The man beside her had awakened by then and was staring at the scene

with utter shock. "Prove that Organa Solo has nothing but personal gain in mind, not her people's welfare! Go ahead! Do it!" She sat up more and purposely exposed her neck.

Luke smiled behind the mask, revealing it to his two so called victims when he suddenly pulled the mask off. "Don't tempt me." Now Camie shared the expression of her bed partner, who Luke quickly identified as The Fixer. "I can't believe you two joined the rebellion," he added, incredulous.

"Not joined," Fixer corrected, some of his normal brazen attitude Luke remembered so well returning. "We're leading it! You ain't the only one who's allowed to follow crazy causes. What the hell are you doing alive, anyway?"

"Yeah, the holonet said you were dead in that avalanche. This some trick? Your sister using the Jedi to kill off the rabble or something?" Camie demanded.

Luke laughed and stood up, sheathing his blade. "Please, Leia hires mercenaries to do her dirty work. Believe me, I know. They all think I'm dead, and I'd rather like to keep it that way." Suddenly he looked away and frowned, and then nodded his head. "Ah, I was wondering why I wasn't given your names. Remhada's done her homework."

"Who?" Fixer asked, trading glances with Camie.

Luke shook his head. "Doesn't matter. She'll probably kill me when I go back and tell her I not only didn't kill you, but I showed my face to you on top of that." He shrugged. "Oh, well. Nice seeing you guys."

This time Camie and Fixer traded more than a glance. They both jumped out of the bed to stop him, though only Fixer had presence of mind to take a sheet with him. Camie, unhindered by clothes as she was, got in front of Luke first and stood in his way.

"Wait a minute! We may not have seen you in a while but we ain't gonna let you go to your death just because of us," Camie said emphatically.

Fixer reached her side and nodded his agreement. "Yeah, we have our limits of the stuff we'd do to you, Wormy."

"You know, Camie, you haven't changed a bit," Luke commented. Fixer possessively tried to cover her with part of his sheet and she grabbed it, doing an inadequate job of it on her own. "Look, I'm a big boy now. Which means I can take care of myself, and you don't need to be calling me _Wormy anymore._"

—

"But—but—" Camie tried, "but we like you. Sure, you haven't been around in a few decades, but you were cool sometimes."

"Thank you for that heartfelt plea for my life. It was touching, really. Yet, still I fear I must go," Luke said firmly, pushing her out of his way and continuing on to the door.

Fixer looked around as if he could find something floating in the air to make him stay, then caught on to a thought. "Help us!"

"What?" Luke asked, stopping.

"Exactly what I said. You don't sound like you're on good terms with President Organa anymore, so really get on her nerves and help us beat her. She'll talk circles around Titati and we'll wind up exactly where we started," Fixer said, his words as eager and impassioned as Luke had ever heard them.

"You gotta be kidding," Luke commented, half-smiling. Then he saw the seriousness in Fixer's eyes and the reflection in Camie's. "You're not kidding."

Camie shook her head firmly. "No, Fixer's right. We know you hate this planet, but why don't you make it better for those who can't blast their way out of here?"

Luke stared at them steadily, pondering their words. He had almost immediately rejected the quotas Leia had shown him in the hospital room in what felt like years ago. And wouldn't this be a better thing to do than what he was doing now? Remhada was right, the worse he got, the less of a bad thing it seemed to him to just take a life. Soon, he might just be doing it for the fun, or just at random. Why not take that urge and help the people who had been his best friends growing up. They might have been of questionable influence on him, but in the end they were all he had. He narrowed his eyes and then half-smiled again, but this time it was an eager, determined smile.

"Sure, it'll be just like old times. Except we get to vandalize on an even larger scale than the side of the school."

Camie and the Fixer grinned, their minds suddenly following the same line.

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"They're sending _you in?" Mara asked, laughing in amazement._

—

"Thanks for your support," Corran commented. "I'm not too eager about this, myself."

Mara shrugged, "Who would be? The reports we've been getting so far have said the new guy they got leading the rebels is a real psycho. But why send you? Wouldn't it make more sense for them to send someone a little more trained? Not to mention a little less publicly known."

"That's what I said. But apparently that's what they want. Someone with mild celebrity status to say he's gotten fed up with the way the New Republic's running things and take off. They figure if I can't get in touch with the rebels myself, they'll find me," Corran explained. "In fact, I'm supposed to make a public display of my discontent with the Republic's action at the mess hall tonight."

"Tonight?Â Hmmm, can I help? Â I like loud arguments, there the most fun," Mara said with a grin.

Corran snorted, "I noticed, considering that's how every conversation you have with Leia seems to end.Â Speak of the devil, how's the negotiations going?"

"Horrible," Mara said, raising an eyebrow at Corran's comment. Â "She's trying to end this quick like she said on the way here; she swamping poor Titati with terms and paperwork. Â I've stopped her most of the time, but sometimes I think that big tub of lard is going to explode from the stress."

"Oh, that's politically correct.Â But back to you're other question, yes, you can help with my public falling out.Â That's why I told you. Â They said to find someone I could trust and get them to help," Corran explained.

Mara's eyes lit up eagerly.Â "Great, let's rehearse."

"And I thought I'd have problems getting you to help out," Corran mused, rolling his eyes.

Latter that evening, they were in the mess hall of the trade centre building the Republic officials had commandeered for their stay. Â Mara ate with Corran like she usually did, along with the other pilots in Rogue Squadron.Â Han sat at the main table with Leia and the rest of the officials that were there. Â Usually they ate in their rooms or some restaurant but as moral and public opinion dropped, they had taken to eating there to try and give the impression that they were working just as hard as everyone else did. Â Mara told them straight off that it would only make most think even less of them, but as usual Leia ignored her, even though it turned out she was right.

"As tiring as these negotiations have been," Mara commented their mildly rehearsed lines, "at least something's finally getting done."

"Not really," Corran said, "We've been here for two months and nothing has come of it.Â I don't want to sound mutinous or something, but I don't think Leia's even trying to fix things. Â I see people keeling over in the streets! Â And she's arguing about it even though she has that whole new export volume of water from Calimari."

Mara's eyes widened dramatically.Â "Shhhh!Â Corran! Â You aren't supposed to know about that!"

"So what?Â _ We're not supposed to know anything, and we're on your side," Corran growled._

—

"Look," Mara said, her voice firm, "we're all getting fed up but getting into a fight isn't going to solve this.Â I'm working as best as I can."

Corran half stood and leaned across the table, glaring at Mara and

doing his best not to laugh, "Sure you are. You just want to get back to Coruscant and start looking for Luke again. Well, I got news for you, Mara, Luke's already dead and there's gonna be a whole bunch of people here who are too if you don't start doing something about it!"

"How dare you question my motives! I'm the only reason Titati hasn't been screwed over several times by now!" Mara snarled, standing up, just managing to keep a straight face.

—

"Oh! Well, I'm sorry," Corran said, straightening and throwing his arms wide. "I didn't know you were holding the place together. My apologies. You know, you're starting to sound just as bad as Leia, everyone around here is."

"What?!" Mara cried, having little trouble feigning anger as the last sentence was something Corran had decided to throw in at the last second.

—

He backed away a step, realizing that it might not have been such a good idea. He tried to recover. "Don't get mad at me. I'm allowed to have my own opinion, aren't I? Or is that no longer permitted?"

"Stop acting like an idiot, Corran, you're too good at it," Mara quipped, smacking the flat of her hand down on the table, shaking several drinks. "Of course you can have your own opinion, but right now you're talking nonsense and aggravating the problem!"

Corran made a quick movement towards her and Gavin Darklighter jumped up and stopped him. "As much as I agree with you, Corran, I agree with Mara too. This is a stupid way to solve this." Corran looked at Gavin hard, and then looked at Mara.

"This is not over," he said, shaking loose from Gavin's grip and leaving the room. Mara swept her gaze around the room until everyone was once again looking at their respective tables, and then sat down again, hiding her smile behind the back of her hand.

"What was that about?" Han asked, pulling his chair a little closer to the table.

"Who knows?" Leia commented, continuing to eat, unconcerned. "Mara seems to be especially aggravating as of late."

Han frowned, "But they usually stick together on these sort of things. It's very odd."

"Just drop it, Han," Leia said, the tone of her voice belying the harshness of her words. "They've just been spending too much time around each other and the stress of the past few weeks finally caught up with them." She smiled at her husband and kissed him on the cheek. "They'll be fine. It's just like when Jacen and Jaina fight. They might steam for a few days but as long as they avoid each other in the meantime, they always resolved it."

"I guess," Han said, unconvinced.

Leia pat his hand reassuringly and added, "Besides, I don't know what they're talking about. Things are going better than I expected."

"Yeah, but it sure is taking a long time. I wonder if tempers will be able to handle it," Wedge Antilles commented. Normally he would have sat with the rest of Rogue Squadron, but as a General he was required to sit with the highest officials in the room.

"It's the rebel attacks that are doing it, I think," Leia said. "There's always that chance that they could start trying to blow us up at any time. Especially with this new leader they've got. What was it they're calling him? Oh, yes, the 'Master'. How self-aggrandizing of him."

"We are taking steps to minimize the possibility of a bombing, President," Shada D'ukal said. She had wanted to stay on Coruscant, but since the Empire had decided not to include anyone in the diplomatic convoy, she had to be there to assure there was nothing wrong.

Leia smiled, "I expect nothing less from you, and I know I feel much safer for your people being there."

"We all do," Wedge said. "Just don't tell us how you got your sources, I don't want to know."

Shada almost smiled, the most anyone had gotten out of her since the accident with Karrde. "I wouldn't be able to tell you even if you wanted to know."

Corran stomped into his room, closing the door loudly and violently, and promptly fell on his chair laughing as soon as it had closed. "Mara's gonna beat the crap out of me when I get back. Mental note, don't take any offers to spar with her."

He chuckled a bit more and then stood up to get something from the food processor, wishing they had postponed the fight until after he had gotten more food in him. He had just gotten his drink ready when there was a beep from his door. Sighing, he walked over and prepared to act irritable and mutinous.

He opened the door to reveal a woman who looked like she had spent a little too much time on a speeder bike. Her short black hair was matted with sweat and her large, luminous eyes twinkled with mischief. She was dressed all in leather, with a shamelessly plunging neckline. Her belt, hanging low on her shapely hips, was tuned to the side as if to hide whatever was hung on it from him.

"Hello—Lieutenant Corran Horn, isn't it?" she asked sweetly.

"Captain," Corran said, any problems he might have had fringing irritation evaporating at the obvious underestimation of his station, especially given that he was still wearing his rank cylinders. "Who are you?"

She laughed, the sound having a rippling quality. "I think you already know the answer to that."

"Oh, great. Look, I'm happily married and intend to stay that way," Corran said warily, reaching to close the door.

"No, you're mistaken," the woman said, smoothly straightening the belt to reveal a blast stick and small blaster. "Besides, you don't have to _pay me._"

—

Corran froze; only rebels carried blast sticks as of late. And anyone found on the street that was carrying one was taken in for questioning, greatly decreasing the public appeal for the weapon. Corran leaned out in the hall and looked in both directions to make sure that no one was there, then grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her into his room, closing the door.

The woman moved to the middle of the room as soon as he had let go and turned to him, raising a shapely eyebrow and smiling widely. "Nice digs you got here."

"Why are you here?" Corran demanded.

"My name is Camie," the woman said, extending her hand. Corran ignored it so she continued, unperturbed. "One of my friends told me about your little outburst in the mess hall. I wanted to talk to someone whose opinions are so close to mine."

"Really? And of what interest are you to me?" Corran asked skeptically.

She flicked a trickle of sweat off her forehead and shrugged. "I'm just good buddies of the Master and he said he knows you. Said you were a good guy. I wanted to see for myself." Corran waited and she smiled again. "And, of course, to make you an offer."

"Oh, this otta be good," Corran said, leaning his back against the cool metal wall and waiting expectantly, wondering to himself who this "Master" was who seemed to know him.

"We want you to help us. Someone with your expertise would be very useful. And you would be able to do something to help the people dying in the streets," Camie added, finally getting to the point but keeping to the casual, conversational tone.

Corran shook his head, "I was right, it was good. Why would I want to do that? All you are is a bunch of terrorists with a small resemblance to a cause and no plan at all."

"Not true," Camie said sincerely. "The Master has a great plan. You just can't see it. And none of the New Republic representatives will until it's too late."

"What is it?" Corran asked, truly intrigued and deciding it couldn't hurt to show it.

Camie giggled and shook her finger at him. "Ah, ah, ah! Not

until we know we can trust you.Â Come with us and you can be a part of it."Â Corran tried to look unconvinced, knowing he would have to concede sooner or latter, but not wanting to appear too eager. Â Camie narrowed her eyes at him and then added, "Plus, you can protect your friends from our attacks."

"How?" Corran asked, not even bothering to hide his interest.

"If you see a transport or building that your Squadron's protecting, you just tell us and we'll avoid it.Â No attack, no risk," Camie said simply.

"What would this mean?Â I can't fight against fellow officers," Corran said.Â "Well, I can, I just _won't."_

—

Camie shrugged. "Then you lead the people hitting the buildings, while we take care of the military.Â Problem solved."Â Corran licked his lips, her arguments were good, and they almost made him want to go over anyway. Â The thought surprised him and he decided he had waited long enough.

"Alright, I guess I'm in.Â What do we do now?" he asked, trying to look not completely convinced.

"First we go meet the Master to make sure you're sincere about joining us, and then you start by giving us all the information you can think of that might help us.Â C'mon, let's go."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter VI<p>

"What the hell is going on?" Mara demanded the next day. Â There was a crowd gathered around the trade center building. Â A platform was set up and Leia was standing behind a podium on top of it, shuffling some data cards while she waited for the audience to calm down.Â Titati and a few other diplomats sat in chairs set in the back of the stage, moping their faces clean of the sweat that gathered there.

"I have no idea," Han said.Â They had gone directly outside when someone ran into the building announcing the President was going to deliver a press release. Â "Leia told me last night that she had figured out a way to end this. Â But she wouldn't tell me what it was."

Mara frowned, looking up at the stage, lost in thought. Â She glanced around and caught sight of a familiar face in the audience. Â Corran was standing there, dressed in light robes to protect him from the blinding sun.Â He glanced over and saw her looking at him and then looked away as if he hadn't noticed she was there.

_ You didn't see me. Â The message barely got though to her, but Mara picked up on it and carefully angled Han so that he would catch sight of him. Â News had gone out late last night that Corran had disappeared under strange circumstances._

—

Suddenly Leia tapped the amplifier hovering before her mouth. Â The

crowd fell silent in anticipation.

"Thank you for gathering so quickly. After much debating I decided that the negotiations were going nowhere. So last night I contacted Prime Minister Titati and we had a long discussion about how this had developed so we reached an agreement on our own. The new import quotas are being displayed on the screen to the side of the stage for all to see. Since the negotiations are now over, all New Republic personnel that accompanied me here will be transported back to their home bases within the next two weeks. That is all, thank you for your time." Leia stood back after making a grand gesture towards the holoscreen that had been erected and then promptly walked off stage and back into the trade center. The crowd murmured uncertainly. They should be happy, but the new quotas belayed any joy they might have gained out of an end to their station there.

"What the hell is this?!" Mara demanded, pushing her way through the crowd to approach the stage. "Why wasn't I informed? This is a joke! You can't expect the people of Tatooine to accept this agreement! You've only increased their water imports by thirteen percent! Our own studies indicated that they would need an increase of at least twenty seven percent to adequately water their population and livestock!" The crowd was beginning to shout their similar feeling, pressing towards the stage, demanding an explanation. Titati, getting more and more nervous by the second, stood and began to make his way to the door Leia had used. Narrowing her eyes in anger, Mara got ready to jump on the stage to stop him from leaving.

Don't! Stay down! Mara froze, half crouched when the urgent message reached her. She was about to look behind her so as to locate Corran and ask him what was going on when suddenly there was an explosion from the stage. Mara dropped the rest of the way to the ground and covered her head, most of the crowd doing the same or jumping under some form of cover. Several people on the stage screamed in pain, followed by a wet thud.

—

Mara waited a second before slowly standing up. No more warnings came from Corran so she peered over the top of the stage. A large section of the side where Titati was trying to escape was completely gone. The Prime Minister, or rather, what was left of the Prime Minister, was hanging off the side of the stage, and lying at an angle to odd for him to still be alive. Pulling herself up on the stage, she looked around at the carnage. Some of the diplomats were pulling themselves to their feet, looking around in shock. Others, not so lucky, were lying in various stages of death. Some looking just as bad as Titati, others with shrapnel sticking out of important places, others dead of unseen wounds.

It was only supposed to kill Leia, but she was too light to set off the charge. I guess you were right, Titati's obesity really did kill him. Mara looked out at the audience but Corran was long gone.

—

Who did this? Mara asked, latching on to his presence somewhere

down the street, probably going down an ally. ^ _Did you help them?__

—

She thought she caught the vague sense of grim laughter. ^ _No, they don't trust me enough for that.^ I tried to argue him out of it, but he wouldn't listen to me._

—

_ Who?_

—

_ You'll find out soon enough, was his only response. ^ And that was that, Corran broke off the contact and disappeared from her senses.^ She contemplated going after him but thought better of it.^ She could blow his cover and something told her they were going to need all the intelligence they could get soon. ^ Besides, someone had to stay and keep order._

—

The door reopened and Leia emerged, looking around in horror. ^ "Great stars!^ What happened here?" she demanded.

"I don't think the rebels liked the agreement you and Titati reached. Something else tells me you're going to be making a new one with his replacement," Mara commented, gesturing to the Prime Minister's corpse. ^ Leia followed her hand and gasped in shock. ^ Mara stepped over it negligently and stood as tall as she could, looking down at Leia.^ "The ironic thing is it should be him having to deal with _ your replacement."_

—

Leia looked up at her with wide eyes.^ She started to try and say something but a distant rumble interrupted her. ^ Everyone turned there eyes west, towards where the sound was coming from.^ "I have a bad feeling about this," Leia finally said.

The ground door burst open and an ensign rushed out, waving for everyone to come inside.

"The rebels are attacking our water tank! ^ Everyone inside!^ General Antilles wants Rogue Squadron in the air _ now!"_

—

Mara jumped off the stage and ran inside with everyone else, going straight for the hanger to get a speeder.^ Leia ran in though the same door she had used twice before and went to the control room as fast as her legs could carry her.^ She got there just in time to see the view screen light up with another explosion as crimson bolts blew apart one of the supports holding up the massive tank containing the Republic's water supply.^ They had begun importing their own after several attempts were made to poison the supply the planet was giving them.

There was an eerie groaning as more weight was distributed on the supports than was safely allowed under normal circumstances.Â The tank shifted, rolling forwards slightly before moaning to a standstill again.Â There was a familiar sound of hydraulics that Leia couldn't quite place.Â Before the object making the noise could come into view, there was the sound of a blaster going off and the screen broke up into static.Â Someone off to the side cursed.

Leia looked around until she found Wedge pacing back and forth, running his hand through his hair as his mind worked on some strategy.Â Han suddenly entered the room, scanning the area until he spotted Leia and jogged over.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked urgently.

"I have no idea," Leia said grimly.Â "All I saw was one of the supports get blasted and then something blew up the holocam."

Wedge turned around when he heard them talking and said, "They're using modified AT-ST's.Â They got some Jawas to fix them up from the looks of them, probably got them out of the wrecking plant they took a few weeks ago."

"What in the Universe are they trying to do?" Leia asked, perplexed.

"We're not sure if they're trying to destroy the tank, or if this is just an elaborate plan to steal it."Â Suddenly the screen came back on, this time from a higher angle, revealing two of the modified AT-ST's pounding at another support, whittling away the metal slab by slab.Â Han frowned, remembering that a normal AT-ST's could easily blast through that in one hit.Â "so what was using up so much of their energy?"Â Then he saw a large compartment fashioned on to the back section of both the armored transports and he frowned harder, trying to figure out what they were for.Â Suddenly the familiar rumble of approaching X-Wings came from the speakers.Â Rogue Squadron's first wing burst past the AT-ST's and turned wide to make their first run.

Wedge leaned over and flicked on the comlink. "Rogue One, why on earth are you in your X-Wings, you were assigned air speeders for atmospheric attacks."

"We were going to use them but Master Jade-Skywalker arrived in the hanger at the same time as we did and ordered us to use our X-Wings.Â She said she had an insight in the Force that told her we would need them," Rogue One, Tycho Celchu explained, his voice distorted by the static purposely used for all communications during combat situations.

"Alright Rogue One, just notify me first next time.Â Now hit the AT-ST furthest away from the tanker.Â Do you copy?"

"Affirmative, General.Â Locking target, over," Tycho said.Â Though the X-Wings' vector didn't seem to change, the targeting information being received on one of the smaller monitors under the larger view screen altered to only include the AT-ST out in the open.Â Tycho opened fire first with his laser set on duel fire, choosing a quicker rate of fire over power, noticing several other fast moving AT-ST's approaching from further west.Â Besides, an X-Wing's laser

could take out an unshielded AT-ST easily. "The lasers hit dead on target but amazingly enough did nothing but light up the energy field surrounding the armored transport."

"Blast! They put shields on those things!" Han exclaimed. "That's what's eating up so much of the power."

"And those must be shield generators on the back," Leia added.

"Switching to quad-fire mode," Tycho said over the com as his wing circled for another pass. "Meanwhile the AT-ST's had broken off their attack and were moving away from the tank and a surpassingly fast rate"though they looked more off balance than a normal one would. The tank groaned again, the remaining supports bending dangerously. There was only four left, and the first two AT-ST's went to the side and started firing at the one closest to them.

By then Tycho had a firing solution again and took it, once again hitting his target with four stronger bolts. The first two took out the shields, while the next hit the shield generator, and the other lanced through the cockpit. The transport exploded in a brilliant display of light and debris. Heavy shrapnel struck the second AT-ST, slowly pushing it over until its tenuous balance was completely compromised and it crashed down on its side.

By then Rogue Squadron's other two wings had arrived and were vectoring towards the incoming AT-ST's. Having listened to Tycho they had already set their lasers to quad-fire mode. They opened up on the armored transports, taking out most in the front ranks, but this only seemed to clear the way for those behind them to speed up and do a strange hopping run through their fallen comrades. Five reached the support the first two AT-ST's had been firing on and finished the job before One Wing had returned to take them out. With only four supports holding it up, the tank slowly began to crush them, sending the remaining armored transports scurrying to the side.

There was a loud, long screech as the tank ripped loose from the supports attached to it on the other side. It began its gradually increasing decent down the hill it had been perched on top of.

"Whose idea was it to put the bloody thing on top of a hill?" Wedge asked.

"Municipality architect," Leia said miserably. "He deserted to the rebel's side a couple of days ago last I heard."

The tank was going at a fairly fast clip down the hill by then, with the AT-ST's and X-Wings in hot pursuit. Though what exactly they hoped to accomplish by chasing it was a mystery to everyone involved. The hill ended at a small level plain and then continued up another incline and so on and so forth for a number of miles into the Jundland Wastes and further on to the Dune Sea.

The tank was two thirds of the way down the hill when a blast of wind and sand erupted from the opposite bank. Five heavy transports rose into the air, immediately heading for the tank and locking on with their tractor beams. Instead of trying to stop it they used the

tank's momentum to help them pull it up the second hill.Â Wedge ordered the X-Wings to open fire on the transports but their shields proved to be far more formidable than the AT-ST's.Â When the tank reached the top of the second hill, eight air speeders with trailing water containers with repulsor coils strapped onto the underside rose from the same place as the heavy transports.Â They moved to opposite sides and each fired a tubule into the tank, small explosions slowly working it's way through the thick metal hull plates while the speeders carefully kept by their respective tubes. Â All this was going on while the transports continued to pull the tank along with the tractor beam.

"Each wing choose a heavy transport and start concentrating your fire on it. We gotta stop those things," Wedge ordered.

Leia touch Wedge's arm to get his attention.Â "What are they trying to do?Â Wouldn't it just have been easier to leave the tank where it is and suck it dry?"

"I have no idea," Wedge said. Â "It's getting harder and harder to understand their tactics."

Suddenly Two Wing's barrage of the outside heavy transport was successful. Â They had brought down the shields and concentrated their fire on the engine section.Â Within a matter of seconds they had melted away the hull plates and hit the reactor. Â It blew, disintegrating half the ship, while the rest just shattered and rained hot metal down on the modified AT-ST's. Â The tank was going up a third bank by now, and two of the air speeders had broken off.Â Suddenly one broke the rhythm of their careful forward circles they used to keep up with the tank and stay attached at the same time.Â It clipped it's stubby wing with a second air speeder and they both spun off, ripping away the tubules.Â The first flipped and then crashed into the ground, taking out two AT-ST's in the process.Â The other recovered and gained altitude before retreating, its rear gunner firing a few useless shots at Gavin's X-Wing.Â He replied with a much more effective shot, blowing off the canopy and then the main fuel injector.Â The craft broke apart before it hit the sand.

Suddenly another heavy transport exploded in similar fashion as the first, its debris destroying more of the AT-ST's.Â The tank slowed considerably, now nearing the top of the next bank and needing the heavy transports to keep it going.Â Then the remaining four air speeders broke away, retreating as the X-Wings kept their attention on the heavy transports, knowing the small tanks the speeders had on them couldn't possibly have emptied the massive water tank.

The AT-ST's ran ahead of the tank, over the third bank and continuing on to the forth. Â Â A third heavy transport blew apart, this time the pilot aimed its decent as best he could and rammed it into the tank. Â Its massive weight broke through the tanks heavy plating, rupturing it and spilling water out down the hill.Â The remaining two heavy transports released their tractor beams and began to ponderously turn around.

"Why did they let it go?" Han asked.Â "They could have gotten it over that next hill."Â Wedge just shook his head and then frowned.Â They were seeing this through holocams set up on the X-Wings now, and something caught his eye on the forth bank.

"Rogue Three," Wedge said, addressing Wes Janson, who's holocam they were currently using to view the battle. "Move in closer to the forth bank, I think there's something hiding behind it."

There was an amused snort from over the comlink. "He thinks there's something hiding there so he asks me to go closer. If I blow up you're paying for the funeral."

Wedge rolled his eyes and then directed his full attention to the view screen again. As Janson neared the hill, the shape of a slowly lengthening cylinder came into view. And then the cylinder was joined by others, and the bottoms were revealed.

"Ah, Admiral? There's about two dozen turbolaser batteries there, can I leave?"

"Get back in formation!" Wedge cried. "Hanger, get Blue and Kyrate Squadrons in the air now. In their X-Wings!"

—

The turbolasers open up, striking Janson's X-Wing first. His shields held, but he was tossed around a bit before Derek Hobbie blew the turbolaser that had a lock on him. Tycho ordered them into evasive maneuvers as they waited for the other two backup squadrons to arrive. Ooryl Qyrgg fired a proton torpedo into the hill just below and between two of the turbolasers. Their support taken away from them, the two batteries slowly tipped foreword and rolled down the hill, crushing the firing cylinders and other important components as they went.

But the time it took him to steady his fighter and take the shot was enough time for three of the other turbolasers to get a lock on him. Sending a concentrated salvo into his port shields, the first blasts tuning the deflector's opaque, before they overwhelmed the generators. They went through to blow the cannon on the top S-Foil, and then hit the body of the craft, sending Ooryl spinning out of control. He ejected, just in time to see his X-Wing slam into the sands.

Myn Donos covered Ooryl's slowly descending repulsor chair until he reached the ground near the top of the hill and ran quickly over the side.

"Someone send a recovery boat out to get Rogue Ten," Wedge said.

"I'm already on my way, Wedge," Mara said thought the comlink, her voice distorted by the shrill wine of repulsor coils. "I'll pick him up."

By then Blue Squadron had arrived and began a torpedo barrage of the turbolasers, killing about half of what remained. Then Kyrate Squadron reached firing range and began their bombardment, effectively taking the rest out of the fight.

Rogue Squadron regrouped to go after the air speeders and heavy transports, but they were already gone, taking off while the X-Wings were occupied with the batteries. Mara finally reached the

battlefield, bouncing over sand dunes with little care for the speeder.Â She reached Ooryl without being fired at too much; he jumped and she drove to the top of the hill and waited to see what would happen next.

Apparently nothing.

"That's it?" Leia asked. Â "They went through all that trouble just to steal a small amount of our water supply and then destroy the tank? Â There are cheaper and less deadly ways to do the same thing."

No one bothered to answer her, since they were all just as confused. Â Wedge shook his head and told the Squadrons to do a sweep of the area then head back to the hanger if nothing was found. Â They turned to leave, Rogue Squadron a little more reluctantly than the others.Â No more than a second later shots flashed past, well below the X-Wing's line of flight. Â The fighters turned back, preparing to meet the new threat, but all that stood along the top of the bank were the remaining AT-ST's with old style battle tanks intermittently scattering among them. Â They stopped firing as soon as all the fighters were facing them.

"Don't fire," Wedge instructed.

"Don't fire, General?" Gavin asked, just as confused as the other pilots.

Wedge eyed the AT-ST's and battle tanks warily.Â "I want to see what they're up to.Â They don't seem to want to fight anymore."

Suddenly the hatches on top of the battle tanks and AT-ST's opened, people jumping out to scream wildly, waving their arms and making several gestures that were outlawed on more strict worlds.

"Can we fire _ now, General Antilles?" Janson growled._

—

Wedge sighed in irritation. Â "Save the power.Â They're just bragging right now, and I think they have the right to after this fiasco."

"Wait a minute," Inyri Forge said, seeing a figure that had just climbed out of a battle tank and up to the top of an AT-ST.Â "Is that Corran?"

She magnified her holocam and sent the feed to the control room and sure enough, there was Corran shouting and gesturing just the same as the others. Â Leia recognized the man beside him as the rebel that had come to Coruscant when this first started, The Fixer. Â Then they saw another man climb up behind Corran and move to the front, waving lazily and directing a smug grin at Rogue Squadron.

"Holy mynock tails!" Hobbie cried.Â "It's Luke!"

R e b e l l i o n Â A g a i n

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter VII<p>

> ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "It is truly a testament to Wedge's leading ability that they haven't shot us all to pieces yet."<p>

"Yeah," Corran said, glancing at his former Jedi Master as he paused his yelling and gesturing. ^ "I guess I owe you that fifty credits."

Luke smiled briefly. ^ "Don't worry about it. ^ I can't believe Janson actually listened to him. ^ He would have ignored me by now and claimed his finger slipped."

"What if he does that now?" Camie asked.

Luke shook his head. ^ "No, they're too busy recovering from the shock. ^ I think that's enough for now." ^ He gave the signal for the rebels to return to their vessels and turned to go back into his tank, casually flipping off Rogue Squadron beforehand. ^ Corran followed his lead while Fixer and Camie returned to their AT-ST. ^ Luke sat in a chair in the middle of the small space, in front of the steering controls while Corran sat at the targeting computer and another man who was also an old time friend of Luke's, Windy, sat at the firing controls.

Luke got the tank in motion, leading the others back to their encampment in the hills of the Jundland Wastes. ^ As he had told them before the battle, the snub fighters didn't reopen fire, there was no point unless they wanted to slaughter them and possibly lots of their own pilots. ^ Corran relaxed, knowing there was nothing much for him to do besides analyze sensor data, and he could just ask his R2 unit, Whistler, to do that for him after they returned. ^ He was relieved he had thought to bring Whistler with him; having someone he could trust was something he felt a greater need for by the second.

He glanced at his former Master again, and then rested his chin on the palm of his hand. ^ Luke was calm for the moment, which meant he probably wasn't trying to read his mind. ^ He remembered his shock at seeing Luke again; he thought he had believed Mara, but there had always been a small amount of doubt. ^

It happened when Camie brought him to the encampment in a stolen land speeder. ^ She told him if he wasn't serious about this, to tell her now so she could just kick him out. ^ Corran replied that he had every intention of going through with this and that was that.

They went through a deceptively narrow canyon, which he latter found out had mechanical extenders on the sides made to look like rock. ^ They could be retracted when they moved out the battle tanks or other land-based transports, but were left extended at all other times. ^ There were no buildings, only tents of various sizes. ^ She drove him to the largest one located in the most sheltered section of the valley. ^ The two large flaps that served as a door were tied open, revealing a space filled mostly with a table, chairs and numerous sets of tracking equipment. ^ The table was littered with charts and data cards, and there were people working throughout the room. ^ The Fixer was there, along with Windy and someone else Luke seemed to hold in high esteem, Deacon-or Deak as he insisted on being called.

"So where's this 'master' I'm supposed to meet?" Corran had asked brazenly. Everyone in the room turned to the figure leaning over the table chatting with Fixer. His backs was to Corran so all the pilot could see was the man straightening and then taping his fingers on the table lightly. Then Luke Skywalker turned around, exposing his face, a smile curving his lips. Corran was so shocked he couldn't have said a word if his life depended on it. Luke walked up to him calmly and gripped him on the shoulder.

"I never in my life thought I would catch a member of Rogue Squadron speechless."

"L-Lu-Lu-" Corran stuttered.

Luke's smiled broadened. "Just add a 'ke' on to the end of that and you'll have my full name. I'm sure you can do it."

"Luke!" Corran finally exclaimed. "Youâ€"You're alive! I mean, this isâ€"it's justâ€"Howâ€"You're dead!"

"Good to see you too," Luke said slowly. "Now, while you try and regain your powers of speech, you come over hear and have a seat. Did you bring Whistler with you? Don't try and talk, just nod. Good, Camie, go take him over to the other R2's, we'll be in here for a while and I don't want him bored." Camie rolled her eyes and left, calling Windy over to help her lift Whistler out.

"Howâ€" " Corran began.

Luke shook his head, his good humor refusing to dissipate. "There will be time enough for that later. Right now I have to know just how sincere you are about all this."

"Of-of course I'm sincere. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," Corran said, his voice still shaky with shock.

"Oh, I know, but you know how it is. It's routine. I gotta check everyone. If I let one person off, then I gotta let everybody off. It'll just take a moment, and you of all people shouldn't have anything to worry about," Luke said easily.

Corran shrugged and smiled weakly. "Yeah, right."

Luke knelt down beside him, touching Corran's forehead. Corran tried to open his mind, but tuck the part of his memory that knew why he was really there in some dark corner Luke wouldn't think to look in. Instead he pushed all his thoughts and feelings that agreed with the Rebels to the surface. Luke reached into his mind, searching for any doubt or lies. As he used the Force, signs of pain became very evident on his face. He looked a little deeper, sucking in air and biting down hard to keep from crying out. He searched for another second, making sure of something, Corran couldn't tell what. He let out a small whimper and then released his hold on the Force, sitting back with a gasp. He looked closely at Corran and all the good humor he had displayed seconds ago evaporated. Then just as suddenly he was all smiles again.

"Like I said, routine," Luke commented, standing. "Welcome aboard."

Corran put on his best grin and didn't relax his control on his mind as Luke grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously. "Nice to be on the side that's doing something for a change."

"I try. So, Fixer, how's about we see to that unfortunate person you routed out last night?" Luke asked casually.

"He's waiting outside," Fixer said, leading the way out. They exited the tent into the blinding sun just as Camie and Windy had returned. Two men stood with blaster rifles, guarding a third man who stood almost cowering in his binders not looking more than twenty standard years old. Luke smiled at him, though a little sadly. He walked towards the condemned man and Corran moved to follow, but Deacon grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Watch carefully, Captain Horn," Deacon said so softly Luke couldn't hear. "You're finally about to see what you just got yourself into."

Luke pulled a blaster from his hip holster and told the two guards to back away. He circled the unfortunate man, his smile disappearing to be replaced with an expression of deep disappointment.

"I had such hopes for you," Luke said sadly. "But you had to go and let me down. You know I liked you, you're a good kid. You knew that, didn't you?" Luke asked kindly. The man nodded nervously. "So, you must know how much I don't want to do this. But, I'm afraid I have to. I have to make an example, so that others don't make the mistake of trying to betray us. We lost a lot of people on that hit you sold us out on, you _ do know that." The man nodded again, no longer having the nerve to look Luke in the eye. "Then you understand what is about to happen to you." _

—

"What's he going to do?" Corran asked Deacon urgently.

Deacon shook his head. "You'll see."

Luke walked behind the man and suddenly the sadness was gone, to be replaced with a coldness that frightened Corran. "Get on your knees," Luke ordered, his voice carrying the kind of tone Corran had only heard used when someone was being tried for life, or thrown out of the military, only worse. Luke lifted his blaster and pressed it to the back of the whimpering man's head. Corran looked around the circle and saw only calm expectance on everyone's face. Luke switched the blaster setting to full and Corran could no longer stand by. He darted forward and came to an abrupt stop just beside Luke when the former Jedi half raised the blaster in his direction.

"Don't you think this is a little harsh?" Corran asked, eyeing the blaster nervously.

"Why?" Luke asked. "He got over a dozen men killed. Blood for blood, Corran, that's the way things go here."

Corran's eyes flickered to the shivering man and then he looked

quickly back at Luke when an idea came to him. "Well, it might serve as a good example to the people here not to disobey you, but what about the New Republic? This will just make us seem like paranoid murderers. Then they'll bring some big guns, make us one with the sand, and that's the end of it. No more revolt."

"That's a good point," Luke muttered, tapping the barrel of the gun idly against his chin. He looked at the man with narrowed eyes and waited a moment, the tension in the circle of people escalating until it was palpable. He shrugged and pushed the blaster barrel against the man's head again. Suddenly he shouted, "BANG!" and the poor man dropped to the ground, sniveling and shrieking in fear.

Luke chuckled and then gestured to the two guards. "Take him about fifty clicks west of here and dump him in the Dun Sea. And give him, oh, half a canteen of water. We aren't paranoid murderers but we will not just let him walk away from us." Corran relaxed a little. Even as far away as he was, all he would have to do was get close enough for a speeder to stumble on him, and around Mos Eisley, that wasn't exactly difficult.

Then as the two men were hauling the man away Luke abruptly lifted his blaster and fired a bolt into the back of the man's knee. He glanced back at Corran and grinned as he holstered his blaster. "I would say it will be difficult now, especially with all the kyrate dragons in the area." Corran looked at Luke, pale beneath his tan. Luke laughed and slapped Corran on the arm before heading back to the tent. "Now that that's over with, I must tell you of this lovely idea I have . . ."

"Actually, Luke, I think it would be better if I showed him around the place first, then he can keep his mind on what you're saying without worrying about where he's spending the night," Deacon suggested.

Luke nodded in agreement, and everyone else left for the tent, looking a little stunned by the events that had just unfolded before them. Corran had the sinking suspicion that it was because Luke had actually listened to him.

"I wouldn't make a habit of stepping in like that," Deacon said. "It's a good way to end up in the same situation as the man you just saved."

"How . . . how often does that happen?" Corran asked, gesturing to the blood stained sand.

Deacon shrugged. "Luke generally has a decent reason for doing these things. Though most wouldn't say death is an ideal punishment for them all. But then again, Luke doesn't always kill the guilty." Somehow the last statement sounded all the more ominous to Corran. Deacon squared Corran up and then frowned. "Whatever secret you're trying to hide, Luke already knows."

"Even if I was hiding something, I doubt that very much."

Deacon smiled and pointed at the speeder now leaving to drop the unfortunate man off. "That's what he said."

And now, one day later, Corran sat in a beat up, ancient battle tank,

fearing for his soul.

"He'sâ€"He'sâ€" "

"Alive, just like I knew all along," Mara said as she entered the conference room where Han had taken Leia when she just about fainted. "You should listen to me more."

Leia jerked her head up at her sister-in-law, her eyes flashing with some angry retort that died on her lips. Instead she turned away again and looked at the floor. "How did this happen?"

"I didn't kill him, he escaped from the landslide and went to the lower levels. He was somehow recruited into the _ Maraheb, and they must have sent him here when they realized I had seen him and would know who he was," Mara said._

—

"But why here?" Wedge asked. "Luke hates this place."

Mara shrugged. "Exactly, what better place for them to hide him? Unfortunately he seems to be leading the rebels now and has lost any desire to stay hidden."

"I still can't figure out why they went through all that trouble just to steal a small amount of water from us," Han said.

"Yeah," Janson said, "Luke's used some pretty weird tactics before, but this tops them all."

Mara compressed her lips before answering, "I can think of two reasons he did this the way he did. First, I think he was showing off." Everyone traded glances doubtfully. "Now, now, hear me out. He just effectively proved that not only can the rebels get their hands on sophisticated weaponry and transportation, but that they can get in and out of supposedly secure areas at will. Not only that, but they aren't just a bunch of irate moisture farmers who don't know the first thing about fighting. That was some fancy flying done by those air speeders to stay with the water tank and still pump water from the same spot."

"Not to mention the skill it would take to drive those AT-ST's around. They looked like they could be pushed over by an Ewok," Hobbie commented.

Leia shrugged, "I guess. But what was your other theory?"

"That Luke's still so unstable he just wanted to cause mass amounts of damage with little care for the lives of the people involved," Mara said. "We know the bomb on the stage was meant for Leia."

"I still can't believe Corran would just switch over like that, though," Tycho added, shaking his head. "It's not like him."

Mara glanced around, looking for any security cams. "Is this room secure?"

"Should be," Wedge said. "And I think we can tell them."

"You know?" Mara asked.

"Of course.Â I'm in charge of this operation, aren't I?" Wedge said.

Mara nodded.Â "Corran and I had that fight on purpose to make it appear as if he was dissatisfied with the way the New Republic was running things.Â Though I wish you had made that lovely announcement earlier, Leia, it would have given him a _lot more ammo."_

—

"Oh, that," Leia said, rubbing her temples. Â "I didn't have time to inform you before hand, but that's not exactly the real agreement that was reached.Â Though it doesn't matter now since Titati's dead and the next Prime Minister will probably want to make a new one."

"No offence, Leia," Wedge said, "but I wouldn't blame him."

She laughed at his tone and said, "No, you don't understand. Â We just fudged the numbers.Â When Corran was making his outraged declaration of how we could easily give the government the increase they wanted, it gave me an idea. Â The only reason these negotiations have been dragging on so long is because we can't make it appear that the rebel threat made us give them the right amount.Â This way, they get enough water and it looks like we were very tough on them."

"How do they get enough water, exactly?" Mara demanded.

"Did you see the section labeled climate compensation? Â It has a number in volume but no specified substance. Â If you converted it into water it would give them a thirty four percent increase in water all together.Â And what better way to compensate for this planets climate than to make the compensation in water?"

"You conniving, little human Bothanâ€|" Mara murmured.

Leia laugh again, "You seem convinced that I'm some kind of monster, Mara, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree. Â Whatever you think happened in that warehouse, I'm still the same person and I _do have the citizens' best interests in mind.Â Always have."_

—

"Are you two going to stop fighting now?" Han asked hopefully.

"Yeah," Mara said, "For now.Â So what's our next step?"

Leia gave her a perplexed look, "Well, I would say use Corran to get Luke back here so he can get some help."

"_No," Mara said firmly. "Think about the kind of reaction he would have to that. Â He's already made two attempts on you life, I think we can safely assume that being confined under you will not help his mental state at all."_

—

Leia sighed, pressing the tips of her fingers together and pressing them to her lips.Â It seemed like she had made a decision when she looked up at Mara and asked, "Then what should we do _to help Luke?"_

—

"We should leave him right where he is," Mara said, with a small smile. Â "I think he just wants freedom.Â All the restrictions of the Jedi held him back and couldn't allow him to protect Cyan.Â When he let go of it, abandoned it, he was able to almost extract revenge.Â That's just he's doing here.Â You will definitely need tighter security, and I would suggest sweeping the rooms regularly for explosives."

"That's it?Â Just leave him out there?" Han asked, incredulous.

"We can't," Wedge said, shaking his head. Â "He knows too much about how our forces work."

Mara rolled his eyes, "I don't mean forever. Â Just a little while, until I get a better idea of what to do. Â I think I have to go there, but I think Corran will be able to do a pretty good job of reining him in for now."

"Whatever," Leia said, "I just want my brother back."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter VIII<p>

The blue light spilled over the desert landscape, engulfing it, flooding it, wrapping around it like a warm blanket. Â The sand glistened, the gentle winds stirring small spirals swirling into the air, seeking their freedom, only to come floating down to the cerulean earth once more.Â The sky was a grayish, heaving mass of clouds, breathing vibrant life into an otherwise barren land.

Except for one exception.

Like a splash of water, the sand splattered against the rippling hindquarters, draining away though the edges of the glittering scales. Â A ruffle like a heavy tarpaulin wavering in the wind was highlighted by the sound of musical chimes.Â The serpentine head reared up, the hind talons digging into the loose sand. Â Leaping into the air, twisting and turning, reaching for the freedom of the skies.

But it wasn't to be so.

A horrible screech echoed outward as the lithe body slammed into the sand, compressing it to an unfortunate state of solidness.Â Â A delicate wing was caught beneath, turning in a way it should never have turn, crunching to uselessness.Â An ebony horn dug into the steep decline, catching the head, but the rest of the body kept going, turning the already straining neck too far. Â A low moan rumbled across the limitless sand as a sparkling sable eye closed forever.

Luke awoke with a start, sobbing with the terrible vision.Â He tried

to shake away the lingering images of the brief flashback before he was fully awake, him riding away on the dragon, as free as it had sought to be when he wasn't on its back.Â For, like the dragon, no matter how high he jumped, he would never escape.

"Go away!" he whispered, his desperate plea heard by no one but the humming humidifier in the corner. Â He didn't even have the manifestations of Cyan by his own mind to cling to anymore.Â They had disappeared as soon as he had come here, and for some reason that angered him even more than when he had them around.Â He kept doing things that would usually make the lizard scream a warning or some judgment, which usually turned out to be true. Â Yet never a sight of the creature, and Luke didn't even want to know what that meant.

He grabbed the bottle of lomin ale from the side table on his bed, tipping it onto his lips. Â He sighed irritably; there was none left. Â He threw on his pants and a light shirt, ignoring the beginnings of what would become a severe hangover.Â Wandering outside, he watched the first of Tatooine's suns begin to rise over the horizon.Â Thinking of loved ones gone, he suddenly remembered something he had meant to do a long time ago, ever since he had come back but he had never found the time during the day.Â Well, he wouldn't be able to sleep again this night, so he might as well do it now.

Going back inside his tent he grabbed his belt and blaster before returning to the outside and walking to his speeder bike.Â Jumping on, he warmed it up and then turned it to the gap in the canyon walls and headed out into the Jundland Wastes.Â Taking a route that, even after almost twenty-five years would always be familiar to him.

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Corran came to awareness slowly, groaning against the throbbing in his temples. Â He hadn't gotten that drunk since Gavin's bachelor party. Â He rolled over and covered his head with the pillow, thinking that might convince the group of Gamorrrians tromping around in his skull to leave. Â Since that didn't workâ€"and he discovered that not having adequate air supply didn't help much eitherâ€"he threw the pillow off the bed and gazed around sleepily.Â He looked around for more liquor, thinking it was too late to be having a hangover, those are meant for morning right before you have to go to work. Finding none, it finally occurred to him to wonder why he had woken up. Â He searched though his albeit questionable memory of the past minute and could remember no noise or physical reason for him to be awake.

Then he heard the sound of a speeder bike being turned on, and it finally occurred to him that the Force was trying to tell him something.

"Luke's right, the Force doesn't have any notion of what a civilized hour is," Corran mumble as he struggled out of bed, grabbed the side table to keep from falling over, and then realized he was naked.Â Grumbling even louder now, he put on a pair of pants and searched for a shirt (He found the one he had worn the night before, but discovered it looked about as bad as he felt).

The first thing he came across was an undershirt, so he grabbed that and wobbled his way outside just in time to see Luke drive his speeder bike out the exit. Â Sighing, he grabbed his belt with his lightsaber and blaster still on it and moved at a slightly quicker pace to his own speeder. Â Turning it on, he paused to use the Force to calm the uprising in his stomach and to ease the pain in his head somewhat. Â Confidant that he could at least aim his speeder in the general direction he wanted, he took off after Luke.

Corran followed him until the first sun had risen and the second was well on its way. Â They arrived at a moisture farm that looked recently deserted. Luke stopped there, jumping off his speeder to gaze around with a strange, almost grieving expression on his face.Â Corran, still a fair distance away, altered his course so he wouldn't be approaching within Luke's line of sight.Â Sliding off the speeder gingerly, Corran crouched at the edge of a building and watched Luke kneel in the sand, his lips moving but saying no words that reached Corran's ears.Â Looking on, Corran suddenly felt like he was performing some sort of sacrilege. Â The expression of grief that came over Luke's face was stunning in its intensity.

He was just about to get up and leave when he heard the unforgettable sound of a blaster powering up.Â The butt pressed against the back of his head and Corran dared not move a muscle.

"Get up nice and slowly, Captain Horn," the familiar voice of Fixer growled softly. Â "And not a single word leaves your mouth above a very, very quiet whisper."

Corran raised his arms and stood slowly, his not so settled stomach making that an easy order to comply with.Â "You followed me after Luke left, didn't you."

"I heard Luke leave, and then saw you follow him.Â We wouldn't want any, oh, I don't know, Republic spies to come and assassinate him, would we?" Fixer asked, giving a small shove with the riffle.

"No, of course not," Corran said, glancing back at the Fixer.Â "I felt an urge in the Force, I came out to see what it was, and saw Luke leave.Â It must have been about him, and it's odd enough for anyone to go travelling around at the crack of the first dawn."

Fixer growled and pressed the blaster closer.Â "You're no Jedi, you're a pilot, Luke told me so."

"Then what's that lightsaber shaped thing doing on my belt," Corran asked, rolling his eyes.

"Oh," Fixer said. Â He took it off the belt and inspected it. Â "I suppose you'd have to be a Jedi to get up this early after the amount you had to drink last night."

Corran sighed and nodded his head warily.Â "Yeah, I know."

"I still think it's awfully suspicious, you being out here an' all.Â I wonder what I should do with you.Â I don't want to disturb Luke," Fixer mused, stepping back and peeking around the corner where Luke still knelt, murmuring to himself.

"Then don't," Corran said, turning slightly to look Fixer in the eye. "I was about to go back anyway." Suddenly Corran's head came up and he looked beyond where Luke knelt, to a stack of containers partially blocking one of the suns. "There's someone there."

Fixer followed Corran's gaze and then looked at him, perplexed. "You can tell that?"

"I can sense it, there's danger there," Corran said urgently. "Look, I had no intention of doing anything to Luke, I just knew there was some reason for me being here, and this must be it."

Luke knelt in the shifting sand, touching the earth that he last remembered seeing scorched and stained with blood, littered with containers and two loved bodies. They were gone now, probably eaten by a kyrate dragon. Jawas had gutted the rest of the property by the time he had turned it over to Huff Darklighter. Of course, nowadays no one dared stay on property so close to the rebel base. This had angered Huff since most of his moisture farms were in the area and as a result he was losing a lot of money at a time when he should be making extraordinary profits.

Luke grinned, trying to remember a time when old Huff wasn't so money driven and quickly came up with nothing. Shaking his head he touched the spot and remembered his aunt Beru, the memories bittersweet. "You've always been the one who understood me first, knowing what I needed and what was just selfishness. I miss you, I'm sorry I never came back to bury you, there were times|there were times when I could really have used you being around."

"I always|I always wondered how it happened, how you were killed. I guess I'll never know. I suppose I could have used the Force to look into the past, but|but I can't even do that anymore. I'm sorry, aunt Beru, I'm so sorry for how things turned out."

He stopped talking and took a calming breath, his thoughts suddenly turning to uncle Owen. Owen|his death didn't leave Luke with the same feeling of sadness as his other surrogate parent did, just an empty spot where the thoughts of a loved one should be.

"And what am I supposed to say to you?" Luke asked the unseen spirit he knew was long gone. "Am I supposed to forgive you for the things you did, just because you were trying to protect me? Do you think that makes it alright?" Luke squeezed his eyes shut and whispered even quieter, "Do you think it makes it any better knowing it worked?"

He pressed his now clenched fists against the sandy earth and squeezed his eyes shut against the stinging tears. "I can't even talk about it, even now. You never|you'd hurt me anyway, even when I'd help people you hurt me! You couldn't have tried to explain, even once." Luke forced his eyes open and took a shuttering breath. "Well it's too late now. So tough shit. You can rot in whatever underworld there is for all I care."

He stood, brushed off his pants, preparing to go, when he heard a noise behind him. Turning to see what it was, he felt some unseen force lift him off of his feet and toss him off to the side. Letting his body go limp, he rolled behind an evaporator and tried to stop. By the time he had gotten himself straightened out, Corran

was running past a scorch mark which was all that was left of a blaster bolt meant for him. Pulling his own blaster out he darted out from behind the evaporator just behind Fixer who was running hard to catch up.

Luke looked ahead to see who his assailant was and his jaw dropped in surprise. Corran had almost reached him, but couldn't make out the burly man's face for he was silhouetted against the rising suns. He slashed his lightsaber in front of him, slicing the attacker's blaster in two. The man cried out and stumbled backwards, reaching for a second weapon. Corran lifted his lightsaber, prepared to end the fight however necessary.

"Stop!" Luke shouted, catching up to Corran and grabbing his arm. "Don't hurt him. He's no real threat."

"No threat? I'll show you how much of a threat I am!" the man snarled, lifting the smaller pocket blaster and aiming it at Luke. The former Jedi, with an almost bored expression on his face, shot his blaster off first and knocked the pocket blaster from the man's hand.

Luke grabbed him by the collar and slammed him up against the pile of containers. "Like I said, no real threat."

"Huff?" Corran exclaimed, recognizing the man at last. He met Huff Darklighter the last time he came to Tatooine, what must have been over a decade ago when Rogue Squadron deserted from the New Republic so they could go after Ysanne Isard. They needed parts for their fighters so Corran and Gavin went to Tatooine to negotiate with Gavin's uncle, Huff. But the man Corran saw now was much different than the well off entrepreneur he had met before. His clothes were ripped and soiled, his skin burned and his hands were blistered in places. His face was covered with lines of worry and stress, his eyes blood shot and swollen from lack of sleep.

"What are you doing here, Huff? This is our land now, you know that," Luke said casually as he leveled his blaster with Huff's frightened gaze. Suddenly Huff's eyes darkened with anger.

"I should have known you wouldn't stay on the straight and narrow," Huff snarled. "Not with the 'fine' upbringing your uncle gave you!"

Corran saw Fixer wince at the remark and then his attention was brought abruptly back to Huff when Luke cracked the butt of his blaster across Huff's jaw.

Huff almost collapsed, but Luke roughly shoved him up again. "My _uncle hasn't got anything to do with this, Huff. And it is _awfully mean of you to come here and start shooting for no good reason." _

—

"No good reason? Huff rasped. "You ruined me! Every other moisture farmer is making a fortune and I should be too. But you've taken over all my most profitable frames! I'm bankrupt!"

Luke laughed, disbelieving. "Aw, c'mon Huff, you ain't fooling us. Someone as . . . business minded as you would have some savings in place. Not to mention a few other services that have nothing to do with moisture farming to keep you afloat." Fixer started to laugh along with Luke and Corran snorted in agreement.

"It's all dried up! They're all trading with you now, an' they got nothing left to trade with me," Huff growled.

"Well, Huff, you can't blame me for your being ill prepared for a . . . financial crisis." Luke smiled and let go of Huff's collar; standing back he considered just shooting him right there. Then he laughed again and shook his head, holstering his blaster. "I'm not going to waste the bolt on you. You're doing a great job of killing yourself with out any help from me."

He and Fixer laughed again as they left. Corran waited a moment, eyeing Huff for a second before sighing in resignation and heading back to his speeder.

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Wisp was very confused.

She should be happy, but something did not seem right at all. Ever since her Da took her away from the playroom, things had seemed very odd. Things were also a lot less fun, too, but at least Ben and her Da were still with her, and she was happy about that. Well, that's what Ben told her anyway. It was much more fun to talk to Ben than anyone else she knew. He said the words in her head, and he said them in a normal voice, so she could understand them, and he always understood what she said. Plus it was really fun to watch him make their toys twirl around in the air. Though, there weren't as many toys on this ship as the other one she was on.

She was happy that she got to see her Da all the time now, except he was always sleeping when his friends brought him home from work. That's what Ben said. He would bring food over and wake Da up. Wisp guessed that her Da must fall down a lot, since he had all kinds of owies like the one's she got on her hands and knees when she fell over. Ben said that must be why, since the new people he was working for were a lot rougher than the other ones.

She liked it when he woke up, because he would always hug her and tell her how much he loved her and how he would never leave her alone again. Wisp liked that, she didn't like when he went away.

The worst thing for Wisp was when Da and Ben were gone. They would send a mean nanny to take care of her, and she wouldn't get to play at all. It was no fun, and Ben was too tired to make the toys fly in the air when he came back. They always had a different nanny around when Ben was there, really nice and always encouraging Ben to make things float around or to talk to her in her head.

She wished he would tell her where her Mum and brothers and sisters were, she liked playing with them. Well, not her biggest brother, he was mean and always took her dolls. But the others were fun, and her Mum would read her stories all the time. Her Da tried to tell her stories, since he didn't have any books, but they weren't as good. Ben said her Mum and brothers and sisters were probably in

the same place as his Da, and Ben said all kinds of great things about his Da, so she knew they were all right.Â Though she did feel sad for Ben since he didn't to see his Da _ or get to meet his Mum and brothers and sisters._

—

She asked her Da when they would get to met Ben's Mum and Da, and he said Ben's Mum would come for him really soon if he knew her at all.Â She told Ben but he didn't believe her.Â His Mum was really busy with something else, so he thought it would be a _long time before he got to see her again._

—

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"Hey, what are you doing up here?" Leia asked, stepping though the rooftop door and peering at Mara. Â

The Jedi Master was leaning on the railing, watching the twin suns rise over the horizon, her face lost in thought.Â She jumped when she heard Leia's voice and turned, compressing her lips to keep a scathing comment from escaping.Â They had agreed on a truce and Mara wasn't about to be the one to break. Â "I was just . . . thinking."

"Of Ben?"

"How'd you know?" Mara asked, her expression changing from surprise to sheepishness.

Leia smiled. Â "You have that concerned parent expression on your face. Â You get to know it quite well when all three of your children are active Jedi."Â Mara smiled too, ducking her eyes and then looking at the sunrise again.

"I just wish I had some clue as to where he is.Â I want to go after him, but I can't leave here, not with Luke running around with only a thin shred of sanity to keep him going."

"Well, I have some good news for you then.Â I had a discussion with Supreme Commander Pellaeon last night. Â He has agreed to send a task force into the Unknown Regions to search for the _Threnody. Â He is quite assured that the Cragon are the threat the Hand of Thrawn was created to fight against and he is sending some of his best ships to find out."_

—

Mara sighed in relief, her body visibly sagging as if a great weight had been lifted and she could finally relax again.Â "Oh, thank the Force. Â I didn't know what I was going to do."

"I understand completely. Â Though you shouldn't worry, we tracked the _ Threnody down before, we can do it again. Â And besides, Luke said he made sure Ben would have the ability to protect himself, I'm sure he's fine," Leia said reassuringly, walking over to her sister in law and gently pulling her towards the door. Â "But come inside,

this world gets surprisingly cold at night."_

—

"Not really, we just get so use to the blistering heat that the cold is a shock to us," Mara mumbled absently. "She looked at Leia, her expression changing to sheepishness again. "Um . . . thanks, I mean, for telling me, and talking with Pellaeon and all that," she said awkwardly.

Leia just smiled. "No problem. Now if I can just reason with the acting Prime Minister, I'll be done my good deeds for the day and can relax myself."

"Yeah, I hear Frisa's worse than Titati," Mara commented.

Leia shrugged. "She's the only reason Titati got in office; he was the lesser of two evils. But at least he was reasonable. Frisa's got some possible ties with the rebels, which means she might just get real hard to deal with."

"Not to mention dangerous," Mara added. "Maybe I should have a chat with her, I can be persuasive when I want to be."

"Not that kind of persuasive. We don't need to add threats of violence on top of our alleged list of grievances with this damn world," Leia said hastily.

Now it was Mara's turn to smile. "That's not what I meant. I just thought I'd point out that it is my _ husband who is leading the rebels and if she doesn't become more agreeable then she might suffer some rather unfortunate property damage."_

—

"Mara! That's absolutely diabolical! I never thought I would hear something like that come out of the mouth of a Jedi," Leia stopped her shocked exclamation and grinned. "But I like it. But alter it to Luke might hear she's causing his family trouble and cause some damage, and then it sounds a lot less like a threat."

"Ooh, that's evil. I think I could like being a politician," Mara said, rubbing her hands together eagerly. "Of course, we're doing nothing wrong, we're just warning her of a threat to her personal safety."

The both laughed and then Leia opened the door and prepared to head back into the trade centre building. "This feels a lot better than how we were handling ourselves before," Leia commented.

"Yeah," Mara said softly, "I guess it does."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"You wanted to see me, Luke?" Corran asked, walking into the command tent later that day. This time it was empty except for Luke sitting behind the table, frowning at a data pad he was typing on.

"Hmm?" Luke looked up and then smiled absently. "Oh, yes, actually. I was wondering if you could get a hold of Booster Terrik for me. I figure since we're not making any strikes anytime soon, now would be a good time to get some new . . . suppliers."

Corran raised an eyebrow in surprise. "We're not making any attacks?"

"No. After our overly extensive battle I think our not doing anything for a while will disturb them more than anything else we could do," Luke murmured, turning back to his data pad. "Aside from going into small towns and mass murdering every one there."

"Which, of course we're not going to do." Corran said with an uneasy laugh.

"Not this week."

Corran's eyes widened in shock. Luke looked up and grinned. "Deak tells me it's a lot less stressful if you don't take all my threats of physical violence literally until I start to perform them. I've gone nuts, Corran, but no quite that much."

"So . . . you're fully aware of your . . . mental changes?" Corran asked slowly.

"I was aware of them before I tried to kill Leia—the first time," Luke said. "Don't worry, I'm sure you won't be around when I finally break. I'll have been caught, killed, or have run off in a psychotic rage by then. But that'll take a few months at the least. Right now I would like for you to record that message for Booster. Please."

Corran nodded and turned to leave. "Sure, I'll get right on it."

"Oh, and don't worry, I won't read the message you're going to hide in there for Mirax. Besides, I'd rather she not come here after you, since I'm sure you didn't get a chance to explain what you were going to do," Luke added casually, his eyes once again reading his data pad.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter IX<p>

"Does it say what Luke's going to do next?" Leia asked.

"Nope," Wedge said, looking at the report that had been transmitted to them from Corran. Whistler had been equipped with a special comlink channel to minimize the chances of Corran being caught. Even so, the "ex-X-Wing" pilot was taking no precautions. "All he says is that Luke intends to lie low for a bit and restock, and he . . ." Wedge's voice trailed off for a moment as he digested what was written. " . . . and he doesn't have the Force capabilities to predict how Luke will react to any situation, let alone a combat one and he fears the results of Luke's prolonged involvement in this war."

Leia frowned. "What does he mean by that?"

"He means that Luke's ready to crack and neither he, nor anyone else there is going to be able to tell when it's about to happen," Mara said.

"Well, he can't be so bad as to put Corran in any further danger," Wedge said. "Right, Mara?"

Mara pursed her lips. "I don't know. I have to see him, get a feeling of how he is. I can't tell from these vague reports Corran's sending. What about our other informant?"

—

"Saltra isn't high enough in the hierarchy they have going on there to see Luke even once a day, let alone give us a sense of his psychiatric state." Wedge shrugged helplessly. "Though we do know there's some dissent as to whether or not they still want him leading him. Some aren't happy with the, um, methods he's deployed."

"Well, he's not randomly killing people, there's one good thing about this situation," Leia commented.

Mara snorted. "He's not randomly killing people yet. According to Corran and Saltra, he doesn't need much convincing to kill someone." Mara stopped and tapped her finger against her jaw. A thin line appeared between her brows as she seemed to come to a hard decision. "I have to go there, join him. I helped him before, I can do it again."

"No, absolutely out of the question," Leia said firmly. "I need you here, I can't handle Frisa alone. Thanks to our 'diabolical' scheme, you're the only one she trusts out of the two of us."

"Then I'll recommend another Jedi before I go. Leia, I can't just sit here!" Mara exclaimed.

Leia sighed, grabbing Mara's hand and grasping it firmly as if that could rein the Jedi Master in. "I know, I want to do something too. But you can't run off and save Luke just by being there, no more than I could."

"Actually a lot more," Mara growled. "He hasn't made any directed attempts on my life."

"Alright, that's it. Calm down, you two. Your stupid arguments aren't going to solve anything." Mara and Leia both turned to the almost forgotten Wedge and fitted him with perfectly synchronized expressions that clearly told him to butt out. "Oh, no. I'm not backing down just because you two are giving me that damn look. I know you can get along because you have been for the past couple of days, and since you started acting like adults, it's been blissful around here in comparison."

—

"That's not why I'm getting upset," Mara mumbled.

"Isn't it? Mara, I know you still think Leia killed Cyan. I'm not

even sure about what I think of this whole situation. " But you have to be rational." Even is she did kill him, she had her reasons," Wedge said firmly.

Leia grunted. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Wedge."

"Look, I've heard both ends of the stick, and they both sound plausible to me. So for now I chose not to take any side in this. Besides, both of you know you can accomplish more together than you can alone."

Mara rolled her eyes. "I know that. We figured it out on our own, hence the past couple of blissful days you've had. But I know I have to go to Luke, I've foreseen it happening!"

"When did this happen?" Leia demanded.

"A few days before you asked me to come along on this little diplomatic trip. It was the only reason I wanted to come, really."

Leia's eyes narrowed. "Do you know that this is how it happens? Was the vision of you leaving here to join him? Or were you already there?"

"I was there already, but the dream started with me in my room, not wanting to go through my door. But when I got over my fear, I found Luke, and he said I had helped him. I'm not afraid to walk through that door, Leia!" Mara said emphatically, her eyes bright with eagerness.

Leia grabbed her hand again and looked her straight in the eye. "But don't go through it unprepared! Wait, wait until we have better information, until we can get you through the door without getting killed before you reach the other side." Mara let her eyes drift to the side as she reached out in the Force, searching for some guide. She looked at her need to go to Luke, and realized that Leia was right. It was her love for him that made her want to go, not yet the Force.

"Fine," Mara said after a moment. "I'll wait, but not for long, time doesn't seem to be an option for us."

â€"

"It's been two weeks, I think we've made them paranoid enough."

Luke grinned, nodding in agreement with Deacon. " Though they all knew intelligence had gotten through to the Republic military that they were purposely trying to agitate them, it didn't seem to have protected most of the personal from the tactic. They had become increasingly edgy and jumpy, expanding unnecessary energy while the rebels relaxed and waited for Luke to set a date. Of course, he never told the general populace of the cavern about a hit until the morning of the attack. It looked as though that would be happening today.

"Yes, I think now is a good time. We wouldn't want any more banthas' lives to be cut tragically short," Luke added. The entire

group gathered around the table burst out laughing, remembering the incident that had been reported of a pilot hearing a noise from behind him, and, thinking it was a rebel spy out to kill him, fired without checking first. He hit the Bantha right in the neck, costing the Republic 500 credits in damages.

"So what are we hitting this time?" Corran asked. "The new water tank is considerably more secure."

Camie rested her chin on Fixer's shoulder, licking his cheek before adding, "That's an understatement if I ever heard one. The thing is, they seem to be leaving a lot of empty spots in the security of the Trade Centre. I have no problem wielding my way in there now."

"And that's exactly why we're hitting the Trade Centre," Luke said with a grin.

"What?" Windy exclaimed, voicing the shock of everyone at the table. "Are you kidding? They're so jumpy we'd never get close!"

Luke's smile broadened. "No, that's what they think we think. Which is why they've increased surveillance on other government owned buildings, thinking we'd go after those. The security gaps that Camie mentioned are massive, more than enough to do some serious damage."

"You'd think they wouldn't have let the security slack off like that after the bomb we sent off in there," Corran said, perplexed.

Deacon shook his head. "It was in front of the building. Everybody in Mos Eisley has access to that area."

"But what if there's a security leak?" Windy asked, fiddling nervously with his data pad as usual. "We know there's a high level breach."

"Why do you think Luke waited to tell _ us what was going on?" Corran commented, wondering how he was going to get this information out in time. Luke reputedly didn't allow anyone to be left alone the day of an attack._

—

Luke turned his eyes to him and nodded. "The only person who could get away with that is you. Though, only if you used the Force to contact Mara or Leia. I probably wouldn't even be able to tell."

"I'm sure you would notice something," Corran said, fringing a laugh. Luke chuckled too and slapped him on the arm.

"Good thing you're not our leak then," Luke said.

The preparations were made quickly, Luke having unobtrusively gotten everything ready without anyone figuring out what he was doing. Corran worked just as hard as usual, but his mind was not on what he did. He was busy trying to figure out how to get a message through Whistler without anyone noticing. Fixer didn't leave him alone for

a second (Fixer wanted to stay with Camie, but Luke was well aware that Camie would never betray her favorite toy, and Fixer would never rat on someone who used him as such).

He thought of trying to contact Mara as Luke had so casually commented he could, but two things stopped him.Â If Luke already knew he was the leak, as Deacon claimed he did, than Luke would be watching out for that.Â The other problem was he didn't think he could get a clear message to Mara this far away, and she seemed too preoccupied to hear something subtle.

They loaded the transports stolen from a local moving company located in Mos Eisley and left, knowing no one would recognize them in the ships that frequented the capital.Â They made it to the city at fourteen hundred hours, reaching the Trade Centre unhindered. Â When he was sure Luke was preoccupied coordinating the forces, he sent his message to Mara.

Mara was wondering down a hall on her way to another tiring session of negotiations when she heard itâ€”or him, rather.

_ Mara!Â Can you hear me? Â We're attacking!Â Warn them, we're attacking in two and a half minutes! Â Mara! Â Corran's voice suddenly shouted in her head._

—

Gasping in surprise, Mara bolted for the turbo lift, knowing she had to reach the Control Room as quickly as possible.Â She burst through the doors leading to the room just in time to see three transports pull up in front of the Trade Centre though the surveillance videos displayed on the view screen.

"Mara? Â What is it?" Wedge asked, striding over when he saw the pale expression on her face.

"Never mind," Mara said.Â "They're already here."

Wedge followed her gaze and cried out when he saw a man with a rocket launcher jump out of the back.Â The concussion missile slammed into the front wall, parting it like butter. Â The ferrocrete rained down on the man as he jumped to the side to avoid shrapnel and the quick return fire from the personal outside the building. Â More people jumped out of the first transport as the other two turned around to display their back hatch to the building. Â The second transport opened their hatch to reveal two turbolaser batteries mounted inside.Â Their operators began firing as soon as the hatch was clear. Â There was the sound of an explosion, too big to be caused just by shattering ferrocrete. Most of the surveillance cameras went out, followed by the power in the Control Room.Â The lights went up slowly as the backup generator came on. Â Wedge bolted for the comlink.

"Get the front cam online _now! Â Send reinforcements from the Prime Minister's office," he added, pulling away to glance at the displays.Â "Power out in half the building, the front of the first three floors is now gone, and I don't even know who's meeting the attack."_

—

Mara bit her lip, feeling just as helpless as Wedge. "Corran tried to warn me, but I couldn't get here in time." Suddenly the view screen came alive again, just in time to show one of the modified AT-ST's leaving the third transport. The view point was from ground level and shaking almost nauseatingly; the officer holding the cam swung his hand in the way as he scrambled to get out of the way of a sudden volley of blaster bolts. The AT-ST's moved towards the building, picking off soldiers as they went. There were only two of them, and when they reached what was left of the front wall, they lifted one of their spindly legs up and placed their "foot" against it. The muffled sound of something being fired off indicated them attaching themselves to the wall, which was proven when they put all their weight on that limb while they attached the other. They managed to climb up the wall some distance before Wedge realized what they were doing.

"Everyone get down! They're going to blow the Control Room!" Wedge shouted, grabbing Mara's arm and dragging her to the floor. The rest of the personnel followed their example, ducking down and covering their heads.

Just in time, it seemed, as the first barrage slammed into the wall. Though power was still being diverted to the shields, it didn't take them long to get through the already weakened ferrocrete. The Plexiglas covering the windows shattered inward, slicing through the flesh of those near them. Then the bolts hit the various monitors and equipment—shattering them just as easily as the windows. Wedge cried out as metal heated to liquid by the by the lasers splattered against his unprotected skin. Mara used the Force to throw a falling monitor to the side before it landed on an unsuspecting officer.

The AT-ST's had all but obliterated the equipment, and were now picking off the cowering staff. Mara jumped to her feet, picking up the monitor again and slamming it against the cockpit of the nearest AT-ST. Pulling out her lightsaber, she deflected the sudden volley of laser bolts that was fired at her. The blasts returned to splatter harmlessly against their shields.

Mara felt a sudden twinge in the Force, and realized that all the energy being used to fire the blasters and keep up the shields was weakening the small grappling hooks being used to keep the AT-ST's attached to the building. Grinning, she used the Force to push against the AT-ST's. There was a rendering sound as some of the ferrocrete came away with the "feet" before the two AT-ST's slowly toppled backwards. She ran to the edge, getting there just in time to see the armored transports explode against the ground.

The AT-ST's landed in the middle of the heated battlefield, disrupting the salvo of blaster bolts only briefly. Realizing the rebels were winning, Mara ran for the emergency exit with Wedge right on her heels. They reached the ground level, forced to jump from the floor above it since they ran out of stairs. Running low, Mara and Wedge managed to make it to a land speeder the soldiers were using to hide behind.

"Sir!" the ranking officer beckoned Wedge over. He crouched beside him and cupped his ear to listen. "We need reinforcements! We're not going to be able to hold them off for much longer!"

"Don't worry!Â I sent for some right before the Control Room was hit!" Wedge shouted reassuringly, wishing he had his blaster with him.Â Guessing his thoughts, Mara gave him hers, while she pulled out her wrist blaster and began firing.Â Then another slender arm appeared next to hers, picking off three rebels right away. Â Mara glanced over and then grinned when she recognized who it was.

"Mirax!"

"You think I'm gonna let you have all the fun?" Mirax Horn asked with a grin.

Wedge barked out a laugh.Â "What in the Void are you doing here?"

"Luke got Corran to get in contact with my father, and let him send a message to me along with it," Mirax explained.Â "I couldn't just stay on Coruscant knowing he was out there."

"I got news for you, Mirax, I think Corran's safer than any of us right about now," Mara growled, turning her attention back to her aim. Â Even as she spoke, they saw Corran jump out of the third transport, along with Fixer and a woman none of them recognized. Â They were followed by some subordinate soldiers as they darted across the battlefield.Â When they reached the middle, Corran suddenly stopped and looked down the road. Â Mara reached out in the Force and caught what Corran had already sensed; the reinforcements were just about to come around the corner down the road.Â Mara gasped when she realized he would be caught in the crossfire.

This same thought seemed to have occurred to Corran as well, for he was suddenly shouting for them to retreat back to the transports. Â He led the way, with Fixer and the woman bringing up the rear. The reinforcements got there before they could all reach safety, cutting off half the group, including Fixer and the woman. Â They were backed into what was left of the Trade Centre building; the enforcements were inevitably coming closer and closer. Â Corran and those who had made it back with him were using the second transport as a blockade as they fired desperately at the Republic soldiers.

Mara saw Luke rush out with more men to help Corran, firing to kill rather than to injure as Corran was.Â Though the Republic soldiers were forced to turn more of their attention to Luke and Corran's attack, there was still more than enough of them to go into the Trade Centre building.Â From their vantagepoint, Mara, Wedge, and Mirax could see the New Republic soldiers capturing the rebels.

Even with multiple blasters firing off, and the distance between them, Mara could still hear Luke's outcry.Â She could see the expression on Corran's face, it was shared by most of the people near Luke: fear.

"STOP!Â STOP FIRING!" Luke shouted above the noise.

"Hold your fire!" Wedge shouted to the people around him, and then into his comlink as the reinforcements asked for directions. Â Luke seemed frozen in place, half standing and looking in the direction

his people had disappeared into with an intense gaze. Â Corran seemed too afraid to move, his expression and the sudden, deathly silence of the battlefield giving the scene a surreal feel.

Luke said something to Corran and they walked out about a quarter of the way to the Trade Centre building. Â Luke looked in, seeing his people still aliveâ€”and then lifted his blaster to Corran's head.

"I have an idea," Luke shouted casually.Â "How about you let my people go, and I won't kill Mr. Horn, here."

Wedge got up slowly, walking out from behind the land speeder, ready to jump back as soon as he saw a blaster turned towards him. Â "What do we care if you kill him? Â He deserted from us, he's your problem now!"

Corran bit his lip and closed his eyes, waiting for the bolt that would quickly end his life.Â "C'mon, Wedge! Do you really think you could fool me, of all people! Â You haven't gotten a single informant in here that I haven't known about from the start!"

"He must not know about Saltra," Mara commented softly.

"Hurry up, Wedge, Corran must have told you that I'm a fucking loony by now!" Luke shouted, starting to look impatient. Â Suddenly he took a step back and Corran tensed, waiting for the shot that would kill him.Â At the last moment Luke altered his aim to hit Corran's leg, electing a scream from him.Â Corran started to fall to the ground but Luke grabbed his arm before he could and twisted it behind his back, forcing him to stay standing.Â "Please, Wedge, take me seriously."

"Sith spit, Wedge!" Mirax cried softly.Â "Do something!"

Wedge opened his mouth to say something, when Luke cut him off, exasperated. Â "And now you're thinking that just because I shot him in the leg means I don't really mean to kill him.Â Well, let me prove it too you.Â Deak! Â Bring out Saltra!"Â Wedge closed his eyes and let out an oath, leaning against the speeder for support. Â Deacon dragged the woman out; she appearing more afraid then even the pale faced Corran.Â Deacon brought her out part way, and then shoved her the rest of the distance. Â She stumbled and fell, cowering away from Luke as the former Jedi Master aimed his blaster at her head.Â "I don't like killing, Wedge.Â I just don't like life all that much anymore, either." Â He fired the blaster, hitting Saltra square in the forehead. Â She barely had a chance to scream before her body slumped back in death.Â Luke brought the blaster back to Corran's head, looking at Wedge with an intense gaze.

"Don't do this, Luke," Corran whispered weakly, turning to look Luke in he eye.Â "I was trying to help you."

"I know, and I wish you were capable of it; I don't think any one is anymore. Â But I can't let anymore of the people I love be taken away from me," Luke said softly, and Corran could see the true regret in his eyes.

"And me?" Corran asked.Â "I was under the impression that I was your friend."

Luke smiled, and it seemed bittersweet. "You are. But the thing is, Wedge doesn't know the kind of punishment you're capable of taking. I do, and I can guarantee to you that he'll break before you do."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'm sorry."

Wedge watched the short exchange, unable to hear their low words. Then Corran turned away and his face cleared of all thought, as though he was preparing for further pain. Luke bent down, holstering his blaster and picking up a jagged piece of shrapnel. Wedge was fairly sure he was apologizing to Corran, and then he stabbed the shrapnel into the leg wound and twisted it. Corran screamed in pain, writhing in Luke's firm grasp. Luke ripped the shrapnel out, taking blood and even a piece of flesh with it. Corran groaned, his eyes glassy from the pain. Wedge was about to give in when he heard movement behind him, jumping when he felt Mara's hand on his arm.

"Corran just managed to tell me we have to let Fixer and Camie go at the least. They're Luke's friends and Corran thinks their detention will make him even more unstable," Mara explained. Wedge turned back to Luke, whose burning gaze now rested on Mara.

"You know I can't let that many prisoners go for the life of one man," Wedge said finally. "But what if we make a compromise. I just let two of them go, and you give us back Corran."

Luke's eyes narrowed for a second as he casually tossed the bloody shrapnel to the side and took out his blaster again. He put the barrel to Corran's head again as he considered it, and then nodded. "Alright, you have a deal. I want the ones called Camie and Fixer."

Wedge spoke into his comlink, and then Camie and Fixer appeared out of the building, escorted by two New Republic soldiers. Though Camie was limping slightly, they both seemed otherwise all right. They stopped halfway there. Luke took a few steps closer, and then shoved Corran forward. He stumbled for a few steps before his leg gave out and he crumpled to the ground. Wedge gestured and the soldiers released Camie and Fixer. Camie turned around as she went, sticking out her tongue provocatively before turning around and slipping her arm around Fixer's waist and sliding her free hand up Luke's chest as she past him and ending the gesture by flicking her finger under Luke's chin. Luke grinned at her and turned around and strode lazily back to the transports. He ordered them to leave as soon as he was inside.

Wedge saw some of the soldiers raise their blasters to continue the fight. "Stop! I told you to hold your fire!" Wedge shouted. He waited until the transports were almost all the way down the street before added, "C'mon. We got a lot of cleaning up to do."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter X<p>

"Remind me to stop going on covert missions for Wedge," Corran

commented. "Mara and Mirax laughed and agreed. They were in the hospital the next day, Corran now healed though his leg was still weak.

Mara grinned. "Yes, you do tend to get pretty beaten up every time you try and go undercover, don't you?"

"So what did I miss?" Corran asked, deciding he would rather not think about the various other injuries he had gotten over the years.

—

"A miracle. Leia and I have started to get along," Mara said.

Corran's eyes widened. "You're pulling my leg . . . Oops, was that a pun?"

"No, but if it was, a bad one. Oh, yeah, and Janson shot a Bantha. But don't mention it to him, he's embarrassed enough," Mirax added.

Corran chuckled. "Then I shouldn't mention that he's now the laughing stock of the entire rebellion."

"Hey, kid!" Han called from the doorway as he strolled in. "How you doing?"

"Better than I was. Hi Chewie!" Corran added as the Wookiee walked in behind his co-pilot. Chewie roared and held up a container.

Corran laughed. "Fantastic! Now I don't have to eat the hospital food." He took the container and opened it to reveal the still steaming contents.

"Yeah, well, we didn't want you to go through that ordeal and then die of some bad jello," Han said with a grin. He hesitated for a minute, his smile failing, then asked, "So how's Luke doing?"

Corran stopped eating and seemed to have to think about his answer. "He is doing . . . well, let's just say he is well aware of what's going on."

"What do you mean?" Mara asked, her concern evident.

"He knows there's something wrong with him, and he seems quite positive that there's nothing anyone can do about it. Right now he's determined to keep helping the friends he still has with him."

Chewie wolfed and then snorted, shaking his head.

"No, he said he still counts me as a friend," Corran said. "And he never intended to kill me." Now he actually laughed before continuing, "He knew Wedge couldn't watch me die, so he just intended to torture me until he gave in."

Han rolled his eyes. "Oh, well that's better."

"Well, he didn't really do all that much damage to you," Mirax said, rubbing his leg where the wound used to be. "He just made it very painful."

"They say a paper cut is the worse kind of pain," Mara added with a lopsided grin. "So, um, what's with this Camie girl. I've never met her, but Luke seems to know her quite well."

Chewie warbled and nudged the ginning Han.

"Jealous, Mara?" Han asked

"_No," Mara said firmly. "She just seemed . . . ah, the hell with it. Yes, I'm jealous, she was hitting on my husband, damn it." _

—

"Don't worry," Corran said, chuckling at her outraged expression. "Even given Camie's 'special' personality, Luke hasn't done anything. Being faithful to you is the one moral he has any intention of hanging on to."

Mara smiled, pursing her lips. "Well, good. I don't have to kill her now."

"And that's the threat Luke used on her the first time she started hitting on him," Corran said with a smile.

"Uh huh," Mirax said, sliding her arm around Corran's shoulders and then pressing her fingers into his opposite shoulder. "And, um, what exactly did you do to deter her?"

Corran looked at Mirax, all too aware that he would be sleeping naked with her that night and the various creative options that left up to Mirax for revenge. "Well, first I tried the same thing that Luke did, except she didn't know who you were. So I added that you were friends with Mara and if she found out she'd kill us both. And Camie said that would be a waste of . . ." he sighed. " . . . of a cute ass."

"Aw, Mara Jade, deterring infidelity though out Tatooine," Han said with a grin.

Mara dramatically wiped away a tear, "I try. It's my life's work, you know." Corran just rolled his eyes and leaned back in the bed.

"So what happens now?"

"I don't know," Mara answered Corran, compressing her lips. "I want to go to Luke. I know I can help him and I know I wind up there anyway. But after the attack yesterday Leia's got the Republic personal on the look out to make sure I don't take off."

Chewie wolfed, and then gestured behind him in the general direction of the Jundland Wastes and then snorted and pointed at her.

"I know I'm a big girl Chewie, and I think we're all well aware that

I could get into that cavern and not have anything to worry about from Luke." Mara said with a little shrug. "Thing is, she's got me blocked from leaving the city. She's got a holo of me with all the patrol teams so even if they _don't_ already know what the wife of Luke Skywalker looks like, they'll still be able to stop me." Her sour expression reflected what she thought of being in this situation.

—

Han sighed and leaned against the bed. "Mara, she's trying to help you."

"I believe killing Cyan was her way of helping Luke, wasn't it? Don't mind me if I turn that kind of help down," Mara growled.

"Look, all bad mouthing of _my_ wife aside, it is probably a good idea to wait until things are a little calmer around there," Han said, reasonably. "Luke's probably not impressed with the way this went."

—

Corran shook his head. "Aside from Camie and Fixer almost getting captured, Luke's probably quite happy with this. It was never our plan to kill everyone in the Trade Centre, and if he had known Mara was in the Control Room it never would have been hit. Though if he is angry, I feel bad for the person who gets blamed. They're either dead by now, or wishing they were."

â€"

Mara gasped as Luke pulled her shirt over her head. He cut off her exclamation by covering her mouth with his, keeping her arms above her head as he worked his way down her neck. Mara let out a soft moan, struggling mildly against his grip, wanting to feel his skin. Luke laughed softly, but refused to let go, moving downward. Mara gasped louder and writhed against him.

She looked down when Luke abruptly stopped, staring at something in the corner. He returned to eye level and his grip on her arms slackened. Mara followed his gaze and saw that there was nothing there.

"What is it?" she murmured.

Luke glanced back at her quickly and then at the corner again, giving a small shake of his head. Mara nipped his ear and then trailed her tongue down his neck, electing an almost animalistic groan. He closed his eyes as their bodies began to move in unison, even though they weren't even undressed completely. Mara saw him force his eyes open, trying to keep his attention on the corner. This time he frowned, and then looked at Mara again.

"What's there?" Mara asked again.

"Nothing," Luke said with a smile, "nothing at all. Not anymore, I have you here."

Mara woke with a start, trembling beneath the light covers. ^ She looked around, assuring herself she was still in her room at the hotel the Republic personal were now inhabiting. ^ She sat up, glancing in the mirror beside her bed and saw how flushed her skin was, her hair matted with sweat. ^ A dream hadn't affected her like that since she was a teenager.

Yet somehow she knew this wasn't just about the fact that she and Luke hadn't made love for well over half a year.^ It must be another vision, but if so, what had he seen in the corner?

"One thing's for sure, I have to get out there," Mara said later that day in the dinning room of the hotel.^ Corran was sitting across from her, with Mirax beside him. ^ She had explained the dream^"though purposely leaving out the main details besides Luke looking in the corner^"and was shifting uncomfortably in her seat.^ She wasn't quite sure whether or not it was just her keyed up to get to Luke, or the after effects of the dream.

"Well, I agree with that," Corran said, "Every vision you've had so far has made some affirmation that it becomes very important to Luke that you are there.^ But how are you supposed to get out of here?"

Mara shook her head.^ "I have no idea. ^ Any luck getting any of your contacts here to help me out?" Mara asked Mirax.

"No," Mirax said.^ "Leia's got some tight security around the city now, and most people are quite happy to obey her orders to stay clear of the Jundland Wastes. ^ Which isn't surprising since the majority that don't listen get robbed or killed or both."

They all fell silent, trying to think of an escape for Mara when suddenly Corran's expression brightened.^ "The blue hair!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Look, Corran, for the last time, get _ over it.^ I'm not doing it unless I have too and I would say that's a long time from now so you'll just have to^""_

—

"No, but you do have to!" Corran said, interrupting her. ^ "Do you remember what your hair looked like in the dream you had last night?"

A bit of color rose to Mara's cheeks before she answered, "No, not really. ^ I was more concerned with the, um, other aspects of the dream."

"Well," Corran continued, grinning at her discomfiture, "anyway, that's how you get out of here.^ Not all the guards know what you look like in person, so all you have to do is change your appearance somewhat and they'll never be able to tell it's you."

"Ah, well, um, damn, that's a good idea," Mara said, excepting defeat. ^ She sighed, "I'd better go get some hair dye. ^ And some new clothes too."

Mara rose and Corran and Mirax followed her lead. "And a new hair cut," Mirax added. "You said it was short in the dreams."

"Not my bangs, they were the same length. But what if someone sees me come out of a salon? You know how the tabloids love celeb hair cuts," Mara added on her way out.

"We'll figure something out," Mirax said. "In fact, I think I'll come with you, it's hard to buy clothes that are different from your natural style, a second opinion would be good."

Corran rolled his eyes, disengaging himself from Mirax's arm that was wrapped around his. "Much as I _ love going shopping for clothes, I'm on duty in fifteen minutes. But if I could make a suggestion, you should pick something, um, Camieish." _

_

"Camieish?" Mara asked with a grin.

"Yeah," Corran said, glancing warily at Mirax to see what her reaction would be. "I just think it will be better suited to the type of attitude you're going to have to take once you get out there. Luke seemed to be just a little . . . playful. He's never done anything to come close to the dream you had last night mind you, but, well, I did get dragged to more than a few strip clubs . . ."

"You what?!" Mirax exclaimed.

Mara burst out laughing, grabbing Mirax's arm to reassure her. "Don't worry about it, Mirax. Do you really think he would admit that if he had done anything? But tell me Corran, what exactly do you mean by 'Camieish'?"

"Tight fitting, leather, revealing, you know, 'shag me' clothes," Corran said easily.

"Hoping Mirax will pick some up for herself while we're out?" Mara asked, affecting an innocent expression. Mirax mirrored it and they both regarded him expectantly.

"Well, no, not really. I mean, I wouldn't mind, but that's not what I meant," Corran sighed. "I've really dug a nice sized pit here, haven't I?"

"Yes. But I'll throw you a rope to climb out with by dragging your steaming wife this way," Mara said, pulling Mirax though the exits and down the road.

They shopped for a number of hours, finally deciding that the only way to keep attention from her hair was to do it themselves. Returning to Mara's room, Mirax cut it to the length she remembered from the premonitions. After they dyed it, Mara changed into her new clothes. For her shirt they picked a tight leather top, with thin straps that crisscrossed her chest, purposely placed to push out her bust. It dipped low in the back, ending in a single strap. For her pants they had wanted something tight, but for the purposes of storing weapons, a comlink, a small canteen, and a change of clothes kept in a super compacted container, a pair of baggy cargoes

made of a near see-through material that hung dangerously off her hips seemed more suitable. ^ She hung a blaster from the loose belt, keeping her tell-a-tell lightsaber safely concealed in one of the bigger pockets of her pants. ^ To top it off, she added a pair of sunglasses with circular green lenses.^ Once she was sure her "shag me" make-up was perfect, Mara stood in front of a full body mirror to view the new look.

"I hardly recognize you and I saw you put all this stuff on," Mirax said, grinning in satisfaction.^ "I think we should show Corran just to see what his reaction is."

"Oh, give him a break.^ I don't think that foot of his can _go any further into his mouth," Mara said with a grin.^ Suddenly they were interrupted by a beep from the door. ^ "Speak of the devil, that's probably him."_

—

Mirax frowned, looking at her chrono, "Are you sure? ^ I don't think his shift has ended yet."

"Who is it?" Mara asked, flipping on the intercom.

"Leia.^ I need to talk to you."

Mara and Mirax froze, knowing Mara would never get out of there if Leia saw her like this.^ "What are we going to do?" Mara demanded after she switched off the intercom.

"I have an idea, quick, grab your robe.^ Put it on, and here, we'll cover your hair with the towel. ^ Give me the glasses.^ There, can't even tell," Mirax said after the hasty cover up.

"Wait," Mara said on the way to answering the door. ^ "The dye containers, throw them out." ^ Mirax quickly did so and then Mara opened the door.

"Oh, sorry.^ Were you just having a shower?" Leia asked, embarrassed as she entered Mara's hotel room.

Mara smiled slightly and nodded.^ "Yeah, Mirax and I were going to go get something to eat."

"Um, hm.^ Went shopping I see. ^ At . . . _Leather and Whips ?" Leia's expression changed from curiosity to surprise and puzzlement._

—

Mirax deftly slipped in and grabbed the bags before Leia could look inside. ^ "Actually, those are mine.^ I felt like surprising Corran later."

"I'll not ask for details then," Leia said, rolling her eyes. ^ The other two women laughed, keeping their nervousness in check. ^ "Anyway, I came here to tell you that the Empire has decided to take an interest in the revolt here.^ Pellaeon has decided that with Luke in charge, this insurrection could become more than that."

"So what is he going to do?" Mara asked, trading glances with Mirax.

Leia shrugged. "Send in reinforcements. We lost a lot of personnel and equipment in the attack on the Trade Centre. So he's sending two legions of stormtroopers, ten AT-ST's, and two AT-AT's. We're also getting two dozen speeder bikes, half from the Empire, half our own. And Pellaeon has also been nice enough to send a repair crew to fix the damages done to the Trade Centre. At this rate, all the damage done in that last attack will be repaired within a week."

"Wow," Mara said, truly stunned. "That was awfully generous of him."

"Yes, and after things have gotten under control here, he wants to speak to you about getting some Jedi Guardians on some Imperial worlds," Leia added, her eyes serious.

Mara's eyes darkened at this extra news. "Interesting. Tell him I'm definitely interested. And I'll also assume that with all these extra troops there will be a retaliation strike."

"Today, in fact," Leia said, her smile taking on a faint eagerness. Mara swallowed, realizing how personal Leia was making the rebellion here. It was no longer about the water rations, it was about her and Luke. "The enforcements arrived this morning and have been preparing since before they were even transported down. Wedge has decided that until the Imperial and Republic troops are used to working together, we'll be leaving the canyon alone. This evening we're reclaiming Toshi Station."

"Isn't that where Corran said Luke usually hangs out at night?" Mirax asked, letting her gaze jump from Mara to Leia.

Leia nodded, the lines of her face becoming hard. "Yes, and the Force willing, we'll capture him there. I told you it was unnecessary for you to go out after him," Leia added to Mara.

"Good. I'll be joining you as soon as Mirax and I are done," Mara said simply. Leia nodded and left. As soon as she did, Mirax grabbed Mara's arm urgently while she slowly began to remove the towel and robe.

"What are you doing? You've got to get out of here and warn Luke!" Mirax exclaimed.

Mara glanced at her with a bemused expression. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. But now I have a reliable alibi. It's going to take people a lot longer to realize I'm gone if they think I'm out having lunch with you." Mirax relaxed and gave her a slightly flustered look.

Before leaving, Mara put a wrap over her hair and a tunic over her clothes and hoped no one noticed the pants. They went to a restaurant, ate a quick meal, and left, saying a little loudly that they might go shopping in one of the stores near the edge of Mos Eisley. After going there so truthfully Mirax could say they did so, they stopped off in an ally only a block away from the city

borders. ^ Stripping out of the tunic and wrap around, Mirax stuffed them in her bag (she decided that her cover of surprising Corran would be a good idea to put into reality and had bought some purchases accordingly). ^ After giving Mara a few words of luck, Mirax returned to her and Corran's hotel room, ready to give the story that Mara had wanted a few hours to meditate before the battle.

Stepping into the bright sunshine on the opposite side of the ally, Mara suddenly felt like a different person.^ No more restrictions, no more rules, she would get to Luke however she needed to, and no one was there to stop her.^ Renting a speeder bike, she headed for the Dune Sea, having no problem "persuading" the guards to let her pass.

It took her hours to reach Toshi Station, and she knew by then she would be missed.^ The first of the two suns was already part way below the horizon, so she knew the attack would be coming soon.^ Using the Force, she almost immediately found Luke's presence coming from a bar, though something felt very wrong with the way his thought processes were working. ^ Something she would expect from him had he been drugged. ^ Shrugging, she followed his presence to the club and entered; the bouncer let her in without a second thought.

Luke had the distinct feeling that something was wrong. ^ He'd felt this way many times before, generally right before a Republic attack.^ Unfortunately, the feeling was too vague for him to figure out what it was. ^ He grinned.^ _ More likely it has something to do with the messorlian spice I'm smoking , he thought to himself._

—

He acutely felt the press of bodies around him, and the steady _ womp, womp of the music as they all swayed with it; one of the more enjoyable aspects of messorlian was the heightened sense of touch, though at the expense of the other senses.^ He saw Camie dirty dancing with some Rodian she had just met, and Fixer was quite enjoying the show.^ Deacon was talking to a dark haired woman at the bar, smoking his own spice, offering the joint to the woman which she gladly accepted.^ Windy had long ago disappeared with a blue skinned Twi-lek, not surprising to any of his friends._

—

Still, Luke could feel something else; someone he knew was near. ^ Wincing, he stumbled a bit as his world started to spin. ^ He realized quite belatedly that Fixer had probably slipped more spice into his drink again.^ Snarling, he tried to make his way back to the bar, but tripped over his own feet and the multitude of feet around him.^ Everything was suddenly swirling around too fast for him to keep track of, and he knew he had to get support of something before he fainted and was trampled under the crowd.

Suddenly soft hands were holding him up, a warm, smooth cheek was pressed against his.^ Whoever it was that was holding him up was saying something, but he couldn't hear them though the roaring in his ears.^ He tried to see them, but the room was still reeling wildly and he felt his stomach heave.^ Suddenly he felt a gentle touch in

his mind, soothing away the effects of the spice. "Sighing in relief, he let his head drop to the person's shoulder and his body relaxed from the sudden adrenaline rush that had over taken him.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to kill Fixer," he muttered, thinking it must be Camie.

"Is he the one who did this to you?" came the amused reply. "Luke looked up in surprise, instantly recognizing the voice. "Then you're going to have to beat me to it."

"Mara?" he said, his voice breathless with the shock of seeing her new appearance. "What are you doing here?"

Mara's blood red lips curved gently upwards. "Holding you up. I think you'd better lay off the spice." To punctuate her point she plucked the joint still in his hand and dropped it on the floor, squashing it under her heel.

"No, that's why I have to kill Fixer. He put more in my drink, I already know my limit . . ." his voice trailed off as his body swayed dangerously to the side. Mara's smile broadened as she took on more of his weight. Luke heard the door slam open behind him and Mara's jade gaze was drawn to it. Her eyes widened for a second and then suddenly she slipped one of her hands behind his head and slanted her mouth across his.

Luke could hear yelling in the back ground and knew he should probably see what the commotion was about, but the warmth of Mara's lips on his, and her soft, yielding body moving against him were too much for his still drugged brain to drag itself away from. Luke felt her leading him somewhere, but he was too distracted to care about that either. He felt rather than heard Mara's back hit the wall, and suddenly her mouth broke away and she was whispering into his ear. It took him a second to realize what she was saying, but when he did, his body stiffened and his mind cleared quite rapidly.

"Stormtroopers? They're hitting here? Damn it, most of my men are here!" Luke growled, fighting down the urge to turn around.

"We have to get you out of here. They might overlook me, but they'll be looking for you. Leia's made sure of that, I'll bet," Mara said urgently. "Is there a back exit?"

Luke nodded. "Yes, but we have to get the others first." Camie had apparently had the same idea as Mara, though as of yet she hadn't let go of the Rodian. Luke signaled Fixer and he managed to quietly grab her and head for the exit while Luke attracted Deacon's attention. When they got there, Camie and Fixer were already gone, and Luke pushed Mara and Deacon through first. He was just about though when he slipped on some sand that had been accidentally kicked in by one of the others. He heard one of the stormtroopers yelling at him to stop just as he managed to stumble his way through the door.

"We've got to get out of this town," Mara said urgently. "The Empire has given Leia major reinforcements and she has every intention of retaking this place." Even now they could see the top of four AT-ST's walking down the opposite street.

"Who is this, Luke?" Deacon demanded.

Luke shook his head, pulling Mara with him as he started to jog across the wide expanse between the bar and the next set of buildings where their apartments were. "Their speeders were parked in front. "Never mind for now. We can trust her."

"You said that about Corran," Camie growled.

"I lied."

Fixer grunted. "Are you lying to us now?"

"No."

"Would you tell us if you were?" Deacon asked.

"No."

Mara rolled her eyes and extended her hand to Deacon. "I'm his wife, pleasure to meet you." Deacon looked a little surprised at her words so Mara added. "Corran said you were the only sane one in this group."

Deacon shrugged and took her hand. "He's probably right."

They were about half way across the sandy expanse when an AT-ST spotted them. It started firing verdant bolts immediately, and the group's quick jog turned into a race for their lives. The AT-ST moved between the brief break between the club and the building beside it, quickly catching up on its prey. It was almost upon them when Mara spun around, pulling her lightsaber out of her pocket and igniting it all in one smooth motion. She deflected several bolts back at the view port, causing minor damage. Suddenly Luke was beside her, igniting his new lightsaber, the blade a vibrant amethyst. He darted forward, slashing the vibrating blade all the way through the AT-ST's leg before bolting towards Mara and grabbing her arm as they ran out of range of the falling Imperial Walker. The driver noticed too late that the foot was now disconnected with the rest of the AT-ST, when it moved to follow them there was a sudden and futile attempt to put the weight on the other leg. It landed ahead and to the side, crushing the fuel tank when it hit, igniting the rest of the Walker, creating an explosion big enough to knock the five fleeing rebels to the ground. By the time Luke and Mara scrambled to their feet, Deacon had gotten on his speeder and pulled Luke's along behind it. He stopped while Luke and Mara piled onto that speeder and they quickly turned and headed towards the canyons. Mara wrapped her arms around Luke's waist and listened as he started yelling orders into his comlink.

"Look, I don't want to hear your stupid apologies," Luke snarled at the person on the other end. "I want to know just how much of a resistance we can put up . . . yes I know three quarters of our people are in here, but how many are ready to get weapons here _ now . . . _What!?! " Luke looked up after his last exclamation. They were already moving beyond the station boundaries, and they had an excellent view of the destruction being raged by the Imperial Walkers, stormtroopers, and the flight of air speeders making random runs on Toshi Station. Luke gazed at it for a moment before Mara

saw hard lines appear around his eyes and mouth.Â He brought the comlink to his lips again.Â "Send a transmission to all our people.Â I don't care if the Imperials hear it.Â They're to evacuate.Â No one is to attempt to stop them from taking over.Â We're giving up Toshi Station."__

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent"> Chapter XI<p>

Mara grabbed onto Luke's shirtsleeve as he leveled his blaster at the cowering surveillance officer and used her own body to keep Luke from moving any closer to him.Â She looked into his blue eyes and saw the understandable fury in them.

"I should kill you, you little shit," Luke snarled, straining against Mara's hold.Â "If you had done your _ job we wouldn't have _lost a quarter of our people.Â We wouldn't have _lost Toshi Station. Â And I wouldn't have _lost one of my best friends!Â For any one of those I would kill you but for the last, for the last a simple shot in the gut just won't do."_____

"Iâ€"Iâ€"I'm sorry, Master, butâ€"but when I found out what was coming, I didn't have time to contact you.Â I tried to put an evacuation signal out but theâ€"the Imperials were jamming it" the officer's voice trailed off as the fury in Luke's eyes deepened. Â He swallowed noisily and continued in a weaker, broken voice, "I had to slice my way into the Toshi Station database and send a signal out that way; I knew the Imperials wouldn't look there. Â I'd just gotten the evacuation signal out when your call came in"

Luke released the safety on his blaster growled, "Are you under the mistaken impression that you can explain your way out of this?"

"Nâ€"no, Iâ€"I guess nâ€"notâ€" "

"Than stop talking!" Luke shouted, dragging Mara a step towards the officer. Â "I have to think of what to do with you. Â Something painful, something long. Â Something truly horrible.Â Something people will remember for years after you finally die."

Mara slipped her hand from his sleeve to his opposite cheek, trying to make him face her.Â He refused to move, and she could feel him trembling beneath her fingers. Â "Luke, killing him would be a waste," she whispered, keeping her voice low and husky.Â "I didn't even know about the Imperials until an hour before I got to you, otherwise I would have come sooner."Â She moved closer, letting her lips brush against his cheek and her hot breath play across his skin.Â "Besides, he had the initiative, and good sense, to not only guess what your orders would be, but to find a way to carry them out when an average officer would have been lost for what to do.Â Such talent shouldn't be wasted."

"But if he had figured out what the Imps were going to doâ€" " Luke began angrily.

"Than Windy would still be with us, I know," Mara said soothingly. Â "But how could he have been able to figure out what the Imps were

planning.Â They didn't even tell Leia what they were going to do until they'd just landed. Â If that officer hadn't been so quick you would have lost so many more people . . ." Mara looked up at him imploringly, but Luke refused to meet her gaze, but she could sense him mulling over her words.

Luke's brow creased for a second, and then he replaced the safety on his blaster, but kept it pointed at the surveillance officer. Â "If you ever, _ever fail me again, I won't be held accountable for my actions. Â Â Â Back to your station, you're pulling a double shift, with no breaks until I can think of a punishment . . ." he paused for a second, glancing briefly at Mara before adding, " . . . that won't kill you. Â Now get out of my sight before I change my mind." Â The officer's face collapsed into intense relief as he backed out of the room, bowing repeatedly and stuttering his profuse thanks and oaths to never fail Luke again._

—

"We probably have the most dedicated surveillance officer in the galaxy now," Camie commented.Â Luke didn't respond, he just shook himself free of Mara's grasp and exited the command tent. Â Mara watched him go, her eyes clouded with concern.

Deacon gave her a pat on the arm as everyone else in the room relaxed. Â "Thank the Force we finally have someone who can control him."

"Yeah," Fixer added, letting his arm slip around Camie's waist. Â "Not that I'd mind someone paying for Windy's death."

Mara shrugged, a small crease appearing in her forehead as she kept her attention mostly on something other than the conversation she was involved in. Â "It wasn't that man's fault."

"What's going on," Fixer asked, peering at her expression warily. Â "I saw that look on Corran's face when he realized someone was going to attack Luke at his old place."

"It's Luke," Mara explained, sighing.Â "He's punching a rock wall."

Camie shrugged, she and everyone else there looking unimpressed. Â "Well, if you weren't here, he'd be punching that officer to death."

"Well, he's going to break his hand if he keeps it up," Mara growled, leaving the tent.Â She found him behind it, now kicking the rock face that made up one side to the great canyon. Â He kicked it so violently, so relentlessly that he actually managed to break a small chunk off.Â "Are you quite finished?"

Luke turned around in surprise, breathing hard. Â "Maraâ€" "

"Nevermind.Â I know how angry you are," Mara said with a small, understanding smile.

Luke shook his head, letting his body sag against the beaten wall as Mara came up to him.Â "No, you don't. Â None of you do.Â Heâ€"I

promised I wouldn't let any of my friends here die. Â But I did!Â And I almost lost Fixer and Camie a little while agoâ€" He stopped and rubbed his temples. Â "Not to mention what I did to Corran . . ."

"But you were right," Mara said reassuringly. Â "You didn't really do all that much damage to Corran. Â It just hurt a lot.Â You can't blame yourself for these things; they were _ beyond your control."Â Mara let her hands slide up and down his arms before cupping his face. Â "You always do this.Â You can't blame yourself for all the wrongs of the galaxy and then take it out on the galaxy!Â I know you." Â Luke's eyes widened at her last words. Â Her phrasing had been exactly like the Mara he had met in the Dream on K'ti'ma.Â And then she hadâ€"_

—

"Mara, why are you here?"

"To be with you!" Mara said, looking up at him with vibrant eyes. Â "I couldn't condone what Leia was doing any longer. Â And you needed my help."

Luke shook his head, letting his forehead rest against her's. Â "No, you shouldn't be here.Â You're in dangerâ€"what if I hurt you?"

"You could never knowingly hurt me," Mara said simply.

"And unknowingly?"

Mara was about to answer when Deacon suddenly bolted out of the tent and stopped as soon as he caught sight of them. Â "You're never going to believe this, but Windy's alive!"

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"Leia, you have to let him go!" Corran exclaimed.

Leia turned around from her desk and glared at the pilot. Â "Captain Horn, you know I can do nothing of the sort! Â He's helped to incite a rebellion against not only the Tatooine government, but the New Republic as well."

"You don't understand!Â Luke's going to be furious!Â The Force only knows how many people he'll kill for this!Â And what if Mara gets hurt trying to stop him?" Corran said, gesturing in the general direction of the canyon.

Leia's lips compressed as she turned back to the data cards she was examining. Â "Mara knows what she's getting into. Â She said so herself."

"And what about the others that have to deal with Luke now? Â A lot of them want out but they can't leave because Luke'll kill them if they try," Corran said imploringly.

"Oh, well.Â If Mara hadn't gone, Luke would be here right now, getting the help he needs."

"Would he?Â Trapped, near someone he hates?" Corran asked, not caring if he offended Leia. Â "He'd never recover.Â Or he'd kill himself trying to destroy you again."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Leia said warily. Â "I couldn't get Windy released, even if I agreed with you. Â Hell, it's your identification that confirmed who he was."

"No it wasn't."

Leia glanced at him, perplexed.Â "Yes it was.Â You were right there when we took him into custody, swearing like a true pilot all along the way."

"But I didn't," Corran said evenly.Â "I've never seen _that man before in my entire life."_

—

Leia rolled her eyes.Â "Oh, great stars, Corran, you're not pulling that on me or anyone else. Â I heard you call him Windy."

Corran shrugged.Â "I was wrong. Â And I won't testify that it is him."

"What?" Leia exclaimed softly.Â "Corran, what are you doing?Â It's just one person.Â Swoopie trash that Luke hung out with when he was a naive kid."

"_Not to Luke," Corran said steadfastly. Â "They're the only friends he's got right now. Â Look what he did to me when they were threatened. Â He's not going to let this go easily and we're going to pay the price when he hits us again."_

—

Leia frowned at the floor for a second, and then her face brightened. Â "Wait, that's it!"

"What?" Corran asked, warily.

"Luke was willing to trade you in for Camie and Fixer," Leia said, grinning now.Â "Maybe he would trade Mara in for Windy!"Â And maybe we can bring enough people with them to capture Luke while we're at it, Leia added to herself.

"That's a great idea, Leia," Han said as he suddenly stepped away from the door.Â Leia jumped in surprise when she saw him and bit her lip.Â He was looking at her with an intense gaze, knowing where her thoughts had wandered.

Corran suddenly shook his head.Â "No, I don't really think it is.Â Leia, I know you hate this, and I doubt very much you want to except it, but Luke needs to be out there right now, doing something he thinks is a way for him to avenge Cyan's death, and he needs Mara with him!Â Someone to control what he does."

"Well, I remember the last time Mara tried to control him," Leia growled.

"And it would have been fine except for whatever happened between you too when you talked to him on the balcony," Han retorted, his sour expression expressing his long standing frustration with Leia's absolute refusal to tell him what had happened there.

Leia sighed, "He just blew up Han, I still don't know what made him attack me." Han knew she was lying about it again, but he was tired of fighting.

"I do think we need to get Mara back," Han said after a long, thoughtful pause, and then continued as Corran opened his mouth to argue some more, "because according to your own reports she isn't safe."

"She's safe enough! Luke wouldn't hurt her, he couldn't, he's deathly afraid to do anything to her," Corran said emphatically. "He told me it was the reason he stayed with the _ Maraheb, he could find a way to get back at Leia, but not let Mara near him so he couldn't accidentally hurt her or something."_

—

Han glared at his fellow Correllian. "I think you just prove my point."

"No!" then Corran stopped and thought for a minute. Han thought he saw the barest upward twitch of the edges of his lips as some thought occurred to him. "Fine, but _ you two get to deal with Mara when she gets back here and flays both your hides."_

—

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

Leia silently fumed as she watched Luke jump off his speeder bike with Mara close beside him. Why had Han chosen to walk in right then? She sighed and glanced at him as he stood with her, his eyes intent on his brother-in-law. And why had he pulled her to the side and told her in no uncertain terms that he knew she was going to try and use this chance to recapture Luke and there was no way he was going to allow her to get away with it. Leia sighed again, because he had been right, and had the influence to carry out his threat. At the time, she had just responded with mild offence that he would think she would do such a thing. It hadn't fooled him one bit.

Corran was standing by Windy, talking softly to him. Windy was frowning, not seeming to like what he was hearing. Leia contemplated finding out what Corran was talking about, but thought better of it. He was probably only trying to get Windy to forgive him for spying, and her presence would only hinder him. Any friendly ties with the rebels could be useful.

She brought her attention back to Luke who was striding purposely forward with Mara, Fixer, Deacon, Camie and about two dozen armed men in tow. He stopped about fifteen metres from the equal number of Republic and Imperial personal Leia had ordered with them. Luke stood just a step in front of his entourage, hand rested casually on

his blaster.Â Mara was beside him still, her arm hooked thought his, and her cheek pressed against his shoulder. Â Taking a deep breath, Leia stepped forward and signaled for the two stormtroopers to bring Windy behind her.

"I think you can already guess what my intentions are," Leia shouted.

"I thought I could," Luke responded, "but I'm not so sure nowadays. Â Why don't you enlighten me, since I seem to be so ignorant of what people's _real intentions are."_

—

Leia kept her temper, knowing he spoke out of a bitterness not of his own making. Â "I want a trade.Â I'll give you back Windy, if you return Mara to us."

"Are you joking?" Luke exclaimed, incredulous.Â Mara lifted her head from Luke's shoulder and regarded Leia with no small amount of amusement. Â "I'd lose less if I just attacked you and took him by force!" Â There was a ripple of accent from around him.

"Are you sure?" Leia asked, letting a mildly concerned note into her voice. Â "You didn't seem to fare very well against these stormtroopers the last time they attacked you."Â Luke didn't respond, and even over the distance between the two groups, Leia could see the smoldering expression on his face. Â Then she saw Mara straighten and turn to look at Corran, as if she had just noticed his presence.Â Leia wondered what Corran had done to attract her attention but his gaze was abstract, as if he was concentrating on something else entirely.

Mara murmured something into Luke's ear and he regarded her with mild surprise. Â Then he too turned his gaze to Corran as the X-Wing pilot made his way over to Leia.

"Let me escort Mara when you bring her in, she's less likely to kill me when she gets here," Corran said quietly when he had reach her.

Leia shrugged as if that wasn't a concern of her's.Â "Doesn't matter, I'm having binders put on her when she reaches us anyway." Â Corran's eyes widened in shock.Â Leia compressed her lips and explained, "I don't want her escaping as soon as we make the trade.Â If she won't listen to reason, than we'll have to do if for her." Â She turned back to Luke and raised her voice. Â "So what is your answer, Luke?Â Make it quick, or Windy's coming back with us!" Â She could feel his smoldering gaze bore into her across the sands until Mara laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Fine!" the snarling reply left no question in anyone's mind of what Luke thought of the current circumstances. Â Both groups moved closer, the soldiers on each side lifting their blasters to aim at each other.Â A lot of people would go down in the first rally if a fight were started. Â When there was less than three metres between them, Mara let go of Luke and approached the stormtroopers releasing Windy, favoring Leia with a contemptuous expression.Â Windy was finally let go and he passed Mara giving her a curious glance, not knowing much about her beyond the scant information Luke and Corran

had told him.

Leia's eyes were so intent on Luke she barely noticed the surprised exclamation Mara made when one of the stormtroopers slapped a pair of binders on her. Â Corran quickly moved to her side and murmured into her ear, and the infuriated expression left her face.Â But Leia didn't notice; she was looking at Luke as he stared back at her, the slight upward curve of his lips belied by the soldering hatred in his eyes. Despite the intense heat of the desert, Leia felt a cold chill go up her spine.

Dragging her eyes away, she turned just in time to see Corran lead Mara past the exposed engine on the transport they had used to bring everyone there. Â Corran had his hand over Mara's binders and it wasn't until they were already slipping from Mara's wrists that Leia realized why Corran had relented so quickly.

Mara spun around and leveled a snap kick at the engine, dislodging something inside. Â There was a grinding sound as the servos inside continued as they were supposed to in the still running transport. Â Then there was a screech followed closely by an explosion that was large enough to make the transport rear up on its repulsors and throw Mara, Corran, and all the Republic soldiers and stormtroopers near it to the side. Â Leia threw her arm up to protect her face as the transport slammed back down, rupturing more systems.

Meanwhile, Luke and his group had begun firing on the now disorganized Imperial and Republic forces. Â Leia uncovered her face just in time to see Mara bolt past. Â Acting quickly, Leia grabbed Mara's arm in passing and hulled back, hoping to knock the Jedi off balance. Mara responded by reversing her direction and using the force of Leia's pull to help increase the momentum of her fist. Â It hit Leia in the jaw, knocking her to her knees. Â Leia gingerly touched her bruised face, and grimaced when her fingers came away stained with blood from her split lip. Â She looked up, expecting to see Mara running back to the rebels but she had remained, watching her sister-in-law as she stumbled to her feet.

"I'm sorry to destroy your misguided notion that you can contain me with a pair of standard binders, but I have better things to be doing with my time than argue with someone who refuses to listen," Mara growled.

"It never had anything to do with me not listening to your arguments," Leia responded, pulling her lightsaber from her belt as Mara did the same, both of them oblivious to the fire fight going on around them.Â "You just don't know the whole story."

Mara snorted, "Oh, really? Â You mean that convenient scenario where Cyan reveals himself to be a traitor in a place where you just happen to have an easily accessible way to fight him off?Â I can't believe you think I'm stupid enough to fall for that bull shit."

"I'm not even going to try and deny that was a lie to you, but it had a purpose. Â At least, I thought it did.Â But it didn't work, and there's no turning back." Â Leia punctuated her statement by swinging her blade in for a high attack, which Mara easily parried.

"Then what am I missing, Leia?" Mara demanded, darting in low, and

then following up with a quick spin which should have decapitated Leia had she not arched back just in time. "What the hell could there be that would justify what you did?"

Leia parried another of Mara's attacks, refusing to give in. "It doesn't matter, it won't change anything if I tell you, except make things worse."

"For who?" Mara growled as she fainted to Leia's right and then jumped to her left, slicing her glowing blue blade across Leia's arm. Leia hissed in pain and backed away as Mara pressed her attack. "For you, for me, or for Luke?"

"For everyone!" Leia snarled at she abruptly jumped forward and struck out with her blade as hard as she could. Mara easily met the strike with her own blade, but the force of Leia's blow moved her lightsaber a little closer to herself than she would have liked. Gathering all her strength, Mara shoved Leia back. Before her opponent could recover, Mara took one running step forward and kicked high, catching Leia in the chin again and knocking her over backwards. Leia tried to rise but Mara was on her, shoving her back to the sand by pressing her knee painfully into her chest.

"When someone like you says bad news will hurt everyone, I know they only mean themselves," Mara hissed, smiling grimly when they both surveyed the battle around them and realized the rebels were winning. "Tell me your secret."

Leia clenched her jaw, ignoring the dull ache that action produced and said in the same savage tone as Mara, "You can't beat this out of me."

"Mara!"

Mara looked up when she heard Luke call out her name, a hint of anxiety finding its way into his voice as he strained to see her though the smoke of blaster bolts and burning armor and machinery. Mara switched off her lightsaber and slammed it across Leia's face to keep her from getting back up. Too dazed to peruse her opponent, Leia watched Mara disappear though the smoke and moaned in pain. Suddenly Han was by her side, helping her to stand, letting her rest all her weight on him. Leia clung to him desperately, breathing shakily as she steadied herself.

"Where's Mara?" Han asked, helping her walk back behind what was left of the ruined transport where the last of the Imperial and Republic troops had barricaded themselves. He pulled her to the ground and propped her up against the vehicle.

"She escaped," Leia said weakly, seeing Corran crouched beside them. She caught his gaze and he met her eye to eye, his face blank. Leia was about to explain what had happened when the blaster fire suddenly stopped. Everyone traded glances, unsure what to do, until Leia motioned for Han to help her rise. They peeked over the edge, only to see Luke lounging against his somehow unscathed speeder, his blaster holstered as if he hadn't even been using it. Mara had just lowered her blaster and sauntered over to her husband, sliding her arms around his neck while Luke regarded Leia with a smug smile.

"I guess I was right, I did lose less by just attacking you and

taking them both," Luke commented. "He straightened, pressing his hand against the small of Mara's back to keep her body as close to his as it could be. "Your loss." He used his free hand to bring Mara's lips to his in a deep kiss, his actions of someone totally in ease in his surroundings. He stayed that way for a long time, until, finally, he released Mara and turned back to Leia, his expression more than just hatred. "Come, my friends! Let's leave this pile of Hutt slime to their fates!" He lifted his arm and gestured for his men to leave and then vaulted onto his speeder, waiting for Mara to do the same before driving off. Everyone followed eventually, most pausing to shout some derogatory comment or make an obscene gesture before going.

Leia watched them go before sinking to the sand again, her expression one of renewed determination.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XII<p>

"Whistler, can you run a scan on the ion converters? They're fluctuating again," Corran asked as he pushed his body deeper into the dorsal hatch of his X-Wing. Whistler, having just returned after a harrowing and somewhat comical escape from the canyon, twittered in sanctimonious anger and then ran the scan from his slot. "I did _not_ abandon you!" Corran exclaimed, flailing his legs to get his body out of the hatch and address his R2 unit. Unfortunately, all he succeeded in doing was bang his head against some piping. He cursed and then continued, "I was about to try and get you back when you showed up on your own. Besides, I am fully confident in your ability to take care of yourself."_

—

Whistler blathered despairingly at him, and then extended his pincher arm and helped pull Corran out. When Corran was finally free of the offending hole, Whistler added a sardonic tweet. Corran responded by grabbing his hydrospanner and rapping the R2 unit on its swiveling dome.

"That's hardly an insult. Other people have gotten suspended for less harmful and less noble reasons. You know I couldn't allow Leia to keep Mara here," Corran said emphatically. Whistler made a loud beep and Corran nodded firmly. "Glade you agree, and I wish you had been there to help defend me from Leia's wrath." Corran sighed and fiddled with the hydrospanner, not really wanting to have to climb down the hatch again, though there wasn't much else for him to do. Once it had become apparent that Corran had released Mara's binders, Leia hadn't hesitated to have him put on suspension until a formal inquiry could be scheduled. Corran didn't much care about that, Wedge had understood and would make sure his punishment wasn't as severe as it could have been. Whatever that punishment turned out to be would be a small price to pay for him to know that Mara was with Luke, giving the former Jedi Master the optimal chance at recovery. The only thing that still worried Corran was what Leia's next step would be. Her anger over the incident had cowed even Han.

He had just lifted Whistler off the X-Wing and was heading to the cramped cafeteria that the hanger operated when Corran suddenly spotted something very out of place. Leia, dressed in an orange

flight suit, striding purposely across the tarmac.Â Â She reached a B-Wing fighter that had been out of the air because of malfunctioning lasers.Â Corran frowned, an uneasy feeling coming over him.

"Whistler, do you think you could find out where Leia is going before she gets through the preflight check list?"Â Corran asked.Â Whistler twittered affirmatively and rolled over to a jack in the nearest wall.Â Plugging in, he twittered and hummed for a moment while he sought out the information.Â When he found it, Whistler displayed the location on a near by terminal screen.

"K'ti'ma!" Corran exclaimed.Â "Why the devil would Leia be going there?"Â Whistler twittered his lack of knowledge on that subject and then displayed a question on the terminal screen.Â "I don't know if the other dragons can tell if Cyan's dead, but it wouldn't surprise me one bit if they could."Â Corran turned back to the B-Wing, its engines just starting their warm up sequence.Â "She'll be killed if she goes there.Â No matter what she's done, no one deserves to die like that."

Corran motioned for Whistler to follow him and returned to his X-Wing.Â Lifting the R2 unit back into his slot, Corran closed the dorsal hatch and jumped into the cockpit.Â Grabbing his helmet, he shut the cockpit cover and flipped on the quick start-up, skipping the pre-flight checklist all together.Â Not bothering to get clearance to leaveâ€”the suspension had also included grounding himâ€”Corran turned his X-Wing around and prepared to follow Leia off.Â Her B-Wing was just lifting off the ferrocrete runway.

"Whistler, lay in a course to the K'ti'ma system," Corran instructed as he flipped off the com unit as the control tower sent an inquiry as to where he was going.Â Whistler beeped his compliance as the X-Wing lifted off the runway, following the B-Wing's vector.

Leia pulled the levers back and watched as the kaleidoscopic lines shrank into unfamiliar and dim stars.Â There, hanging majestically in the blackness of space, spun K'ti'ma V.Â The largest of its three main oceans was facing her, sprinkled with small islands, and framed on the east by the jagged edge of a green continent.Â Towards the bottom of the landmass was a great desert, with a single sea marring its surface.Â The whole world seemed to have a bluish green cast to it, from the great forests to the greater waters, and even the sands of the desert.

She turned the B-Wing to the same coordinates as those Han had used to land the _ Falcon.Â Though the upper atmosphere was fairly turbulent, the rest of the landing was uneventful.Â She exited the fighter and breathed deeply, expelling the stale air of the cabin from her lungs.Â Unclipping her lightsaber, Leia gazed around at the massive trees and the tall grass, hoping that the absence of the abundant animals her husband had described was due to the noise of the B-Wing's landing and not the presence of a predator.Â Stretching out with the Force, Leia frowned.Â Everything around her seemed to have a kind of innocence, and an abundance of welcoming feelings.Â Leia let her lip curl and stalked towards a break in the trees._

"It's probably just the dragons playing tricks on my mind.Â Well, I'm ready for you!Â You hear me?!"Â Leia shouted suddenly, stopping to gaze into the empty branches.Â "You won't screw with my head like you did to Luke! Â And what you did to him won't go unanswered! Â What goes around comes around, you bastards!"

"And the same applies to you."

Leia spun around just in time to see a diamond dragon jump down from a branch, its sable eyes flashing in anger.Â Its body was almost twice the size of Cyan's, and its crystalline form rippled with power. Â It slinked closer to Leia and hissed, "We gave Luke a kind of immortality, a never ending life.Â And you destroyed it."

"Immortality? Â At what cost?Â His life, his family, his friends?Â His soul?" Leia demanded.Â "If he knew the price, I'm sure he would have declined."

The dragon took another step closer and Leia backed away.Â "There was no price.Â All he had to do was be a loyal friend to a creature that was born his loyal friend. Â Just as you only had to be a loyal sister to an already loyal brother. Â But it wasn't Cyan or Luke who failed in their duty, but you who failed yours."

"I protected him! Â I protected him from the 'loyal friend's' evil. Â If Luke hadn't been weakened by the spice he would have seen what you truly were, just as I did!" Leia shouted, igniting her lightsaber and standing in an en guard position.

The dragon shook his head sadly.Â "Do you really believe that? Â Luke is destined to be one of the greatest Jedi Masters that ever lived, and you, who never even completed your training, think that you could sense something that he could not?Â That Mara could not?Â That Corran Horn, who's _fully trained power lies in that of the mind?Â It is not Luke who is naive, but you. You are just plain stupid to think that you could harm me, or the Mother Dragon with that lightsaber as you came here to do, when you already know it was ineffective on my weaker brethren who had no _padmiri to strengthen them."__

—

"I knew it! Â I knew you had to get something out of this! Â You suck the life out of them, don't you?" Leia demanded, holding her ground as the diamond one came closer.

"No, dragon and _ padmiri are strengthened by our love for each other, just as your love for Han strengthens you.Â And Luke's love for Mara now strengthens him against something he cannot defeat." Â The dragon stopped talking and gazed at Leia steadily. Â "But it is something you can.Â _ You have the answer, and you can still save him from a fate worse than death."__

—

Leia kept her face impassive, though she felt a twinge of nervousness.Â How could this creature know what she knew? Â She had told no one and it had happened on the other side of the galaxy from

K'ti'ma.Â Leia compressed her lips and growled, "I don't know what you're talking about. Â But this ends now!Â Free Luke, you can't use him anymore!

The dragon just regarded her for a moment, and then it seemed he almost smiled. Â "Did you know that there is not a single creature or object in this system that doesn't represent something?Â You're walking on a living metaphor."

"What are you talking about?" Leia asked, thrown off by the sudden and cryptic change of subject.

"Cyan represents passion, this world represents life, I represent a need to rectify a terrible deed. Â And there is one here who is quite willing to rectify _ your terrible deed, though it is not the best way to do so," the dragon explained, his voice soft._

—

Leia tilted her head at the dragon, her confusing rising along with her sense of dread. Â "And who is it who will rectify my deed?"

"Me," a deep voice hissed from behind her.Â Leia spun around just as Carmine slithered down from his perch, his clear eyes smoldering in anger.Â Leia could see the blue saliva dripping from his maw, and backed away hastily, remembering what Han had told her it could do.Â "I represent revenge, and all the terrible consequences of it. Â You came here for revenge, and in doing so have become just as terrible a monster as I."Â Carmine crouched down, ready to spring on his pray.Â Crying out in fear, Leia bolted deeper into the forest, where she hoped the trees would grow too thick for him to follow. Â But she quickly realized that was a futile effort as Carmine used the trees to push off from.Â Suddenly she was on a bluish green beach, the waters so still it could have been a mirror.Â The morning sun filtered through the trees creating an almost surreal atmosphere that would have been beautiful had Leia the time to admire it.

She tore off down the sands, searching desperately for a way back into the comparative safety of the woods. Â But a steep rocky slope, which she might be able to climb though not before Carmine reached her, framed the rest of the beach.

She had just made the decision to fightâ€"for she really didn't have any otherâ€"when her legs became tangled in a plant.Â With a shriek of terror she tumbled to the ground and cracked her head against a rock. Â The last thing she heard before darkness fell, was the sound of high-pitched laughter.

She woke up slowly, not daring to move least she bring on another attack. Â She stretched out with the Force, trying to locate Carmine.

"Don't fear us! Â We're your friends.Â Carmine's gone away, we've seen to his end."

Leia frowned, opening her eyes slowly to see a very odd looking creature peering down on her. Â It had beady black eyes, and shaggy mouse colored fur. Â It flapped its floppy ears and leaned on its ornate staff. Â It's arms were scrawny compared to its height, which

couldn't have been more than two feet.Â It had three toes with sharp claws and no tail. Â Lifting her head, Leia realized there was dozens of them all around her. Â When she started to get up, they started cheering with musical, squeaky voices and jumped up in down with glee.

"She is unharmed!"

"There's no reason to be alarmed!"

"It is how we were told in the past!"

"Hooray! Â The Daughter of the Suns has come at last!"

"Daughter of the Suns?" Leia asked, puzzled even more.Â "What are you talking about?"

The creature that was standing beside her bobbed his head up and down, in a gesture that both calmed and reassured its brethren.Â "Our legend has some true, the dragons were wrong!Â Now is our time, our place to be strong!"

"I don't understand! Â Thank you for helping me, but what are you talking about?" Leia asked, exasperated.

"A set moment in time, they said would come," the "leader" explained.Â "With you, the Blue, and the Son of Suns together, united as one. Â But that can't be now, for you've slain the blue, now Darkness will fall, and we'll reign here too!"

Leia looked around, suddenly feeling much less safe than she had a moment ago. "The Blue" must mean Cyan; so not all the creatures on this world could read her thoughts. Â "What darkness?Â And what does Cyan being gone have to do with it?"

"The Blue was to keep the Son of Suns alive, to stop the Darkness' coming. Â But now that he is gone, the Son of Suns will end, and the Darkness will come flooding," the leader said.

"Is the Son of Suns named Luke Skywalker?" Leia asked weakly.Â The leader nodded.Â Leia got unsteadily to her feet and then asked, "Then what has this to do with you?"

"Without the Son of Suns to stop the Darkness, the dragons must go to fight. Â But with the Daughter of the Suns' hatred, the Darkness will extinguish all light."

Leia backed away, trying to get out of the circle of creatures as they looked up at her with beady eager eyes.Â "No . . . it couldn't be that bad.Â Cyan being gone couldn't do _that much!_"

—

"You've damned all your kind and done a service to us," the leader said, confused by Leia's sudden fear of them.Â "Why are you upset? Â What has caused such a fuss?"

"Such a fuss? Â Such a fuss!Â I was better off with the bloody dragons!" Leia exclaimed, running back towards the forest. Â The creatures squealed and shouted, glad for a chase. Â She had just

reached the opening she had originally come through when something small and crystalline jumped out at her. "Shrieking in fear, Leia dropped to the ground and covered her head. She heard it land on the other side of her and suddenly the strange creatures screamed in terror and ran in the opposite direction. Leia looked up and saw that it was a baby dragon chasing them away. It looked like a very tiny version of Cyan, only without the bronze skin and somehow she knew it was female and not the same one she had met earlier. Her crest was a little bigger, and her tail was a little thinner and ended in the shape of a rhombus. Her entire body was covered in tiny diamonds, patterned with different sizes. Not daring to rise, Leia watched as the small leviathan walked gracefully over. Even though Leia was sure the dragon had the body of an adolescent, she was distinctly aware of an aura of power and wisdom that surrounded the creature.

"Who are you?" Leia asked hesitantly.

"I am the one who was in a beginning, and I am the one who will be there for that beginning's end, and I shall be there for that end's end. I have all the knowledge of those who came before you, and I will have all the knowledge of those who will come after. I was at the start of a circle that is now turning onto itself. And you, my dear, have no conception of how you fit in," the dragon said, her voice musical like a flute, soothing and timeless. She regarded Leia for a moment, staring up at her with sable eyes. Leia slowly climbed back to her feet, though for some reason standing taller than the dragon seemed like an insult. "Stop that," she told herself firmly, "the dragons are just playing tricks with your mind again."

—

"Why did you help me," Leia asked, keeping her voice even. "I came here to hurt you."

The dragon didn't answer for a time, and for a second Leia didn't think she was going to answer at all. Then the dragon spoke, idly walking around Leia, "You will leave here with a greater understanding than when you came, and for that I am glad. The Daughter of the Suns must continue; she must do what has to be done. You have a choice laid out before you, and your decision may come too late." By this time the dragon had walked behind Leia, and when she came into view again, she was twice the size she previously was, her body a little more proportioned, almost like a dragon version of a teenager.

"This isn't real, is it," Leia said slowly.

The dragon regarded her in amusement before saying, "All the clues were there, right in front of you. But, of course, you have trouble seeing past your own opinions sometimes. A failing so many humans have. But in time, you will see as clearly as your brother, and then the light will triumph again." The dragon looked into the sky where a red tint was staining its turquoise surface. "The darkness grows. Our sister star gets bigger and bigger as the evil that has returned gains more power. Time is running short."

The dragon had walked behind Leia again, and this time she appeared as an adult, her body a picture of perfection, her movements silk,

her voice deepened, sounding more like an oboe.Â

"Wake now, Daughter of the Suns," the dragon said, stopping and regarding her yet again with those penetrating black orbs.Â "Walk your path."

"Wait!" Leia cried as everything seemed to dim and the ground felt like it was falling out from under her. Â "Who are you?Â How do you know all this!"

"I am the beginning and the end.Â I am the Mother Dragon, and we shall meet again.Â Wake up, Leia . . . wake up . . . "

"Leia! Â Wake up!Â Please, get up! Â WAKE UP!"

Leia jolted to awareness and realized she was still lying on the beach. Â She was being shaken roughly by, surprisingly enough, Corran. Â "What the devil are you doing here?" she demanded, her voice thick from sleep.

"Emperor's black bones! Â We'll have time to talk about that later, if we live that long. Â Quick!Â Get up, I don't know how long that little guy's going to be able to hold out," Corran said hurriedly, helping her stand.Â Turning to the sounds of fighting, Leia saw Carmine snapping at a small green object clinging to his back for all it was worth.Â Leia belatedly realized it was another baby dragon, though this one had brilliant blue eyes, not sable.

Leaping into the air, Carmine twisted his body with a mighty buck and the little dragon went tumbling to the ground.Â Â Â Carmine tried to pounce on the emerald creature, but he was too quick. Â Jumping out of the way onto the rock wall, the little dragon turned around and spat at the red.Â Though it wasn't nearly as impressive as some of the projectiles Leia had seen Cyan lob out, it was more than enough.Â It hit Carmine across the face and down his neck, causing the larger dragon to shriek in pain and recoil.Â Carmine tried to retaliate with some of his own deadly acid, but the baby dragon used his smaller size to his advantage again and moved out of the way far quicker than an adult could possibly manage. Â Unfortunately, the emerald's disadvantage came from his still awkward body, not his speed.Â He landed on the sand and tripped on his oversized wings. Â Carmine hissed with pleasure and pounced on the small creature, crushing him to the ground and opening his maw to end his short life.

"No!" Corran shouted, bolting forward.Â He had seen the little creature start to fight Carmine, and knew he was doing it to help Leia. Corran just couldn't let him die for that.Â Carmine was so involved in his soon to be lunch that he didn't hear Corran coming. Â The X-Wing pilot swung his lightsaber in a wide arc, hitting the flesh exposed by the emerald's acid.Â Carmine screamed and reared back, black blood dribbling down his neck. Â Carmine stumbled back a few steps as Corran moved in front of the wounded emerald, struggling to get to his feet. Â Carmine regarded Corran for a moment, and then with a vicious snarl, easily leapt over the rocky incline and into the forest.

Corran heard Leia sigh in relief as he knelt beside the injured emerald dragon. Â "Are you all right?" he asked, gently helping him to stand. Â His side was marred by a set of deep gashes, though the

rest of his body was only covered in small cuts and bruises.

"I-I think so. Â Thank you for helping me," the dragon said, standing on all fours instead of on his hind legs like the rest of its brethren. Â It held out a small paw to Corran. Â "My name is Olive."

"My name is Corran, but you might as well call me Corn, your species can't seem to get their tongues around my name," Corran said with a grin. Â "And my friend you so gallantly protected isâ€"

"I know who she is! Â We all do.Â It is Leia Skywalker, the Daughter of the Suns!Â It was my honor to protect her," Olive said solemnly.

"Leia Skywalker? Â Hmm . . . well, I guess, technically, that's what her name really is, isn't it?" Corran commented.Â He looked closer at the small dragon when he realized he was shifting as much weight off its left hind as possible. Â "Do you need help?Â I could take you to your nest or where ever it is you live."

Olive looked up at him for a minute and then moan sadly.Â "I don't have a home anymore."

"What do you mean?" Leia asked, finally approaching them, a little at a loss for what to do.

"I attacked Carmine, a great hunter with a great place set for him by Fate. Â The others will never except me back once they know," Olive said sadly.

Leia's forehead crease as she looked at the small creature.Â He looked more hurt than he was letting on, and Leia could feel nothing to make her distrust him.Â Looking at him he seemed so small, so awkward, and so timid that she knew he probably wasn't more than a few days old.Â In fact, is she compared him to Cyan's rate of growth, he probably was only a day old at best.Â Olive probably was too young to have been influenced by the others. Â Cyan had helped Luke when he was first hatched; perhaps what he became was a learned behavior.Â If that was so, Olive had gone against his species despite what he was being taught.Â Leia compressed her lips; it followed that the other dragons would persecute the baby for it too.

She looked at Corran and saw him staring back with a raised eyebrow. Â She looked away, turning her gaze to the depressed dragon. Â "Well, we're not going to leave you here if you have no place to go.Â I suppose it's my fault anyway. Â You can come with us and get some medical attention at least." _ And maybe we can keep you from becoming one of the monsters that created you.Â And you could help us fight against them, Leia added to herself._

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> T h eÂ R e u n i o n<p>

Chapter XIII

"Why are you here, Corran?"

"I wanted to know what you were doing that was so important that you

would put your life in danger," Corran answered evenly. "He was carefully tending to Olive's wounds as best as his limited medical training would allow. "You've never been here before. I didn't think you knew what you were getting yourself into."

Leia smiled wanly as she settled onto the flattened grass beside Corran's X-Wing. "I can take care of myself."

"So can Luke and Mara," Corran added absently.

Leia shot him an annoyed glance but any response was cut off by Olive's loud, contented moan. "Thank you _very much, Corn!"_

—

"You've _ very welcome, Olive," Corran said with a small laugh as he finished injecting the painkiller. "Leia, I have a question for you. Why do you trust Olive when you trust no other dragon?"_

—

"He's innocent. The other dragons haven't had the chance to corrupt him," Leia said simply.

Olive turned his sapphire eyes to Leia. "What does that mean? We are all taught the same things since before we even leave the egg, whether we are destined to have a _ padmiri or not."_

—

"So you were taught all the same things that, say, Cyan was taught?" Corran asked, glaring at Leia even though he was addressing Olive.

"Yes, we all are. We are taught that our first loyalty is to the current _ padmiri, than to the Force, and then to the Mother Dragon. It is how it has always been," Olive said, sounding puzzled that they didn't already know. "Didn't Cyan tell you this?"_

—

Corran smiled. "He told me, but Leia didn't like Cyan too much."

"Why not? He is only an extension of Master Skywalker's personality, unbound by rules and restrictions except those imposed by Master Skywalker," Olive said, sounding like he was reciting something off of a learning holo, his perplexity deepening.

Leia licked her lips slowly, glaring at Corran in further annoyance before explaining, "That may have been what he was supposed to be, but I think Cyan decided that he's first loyalty lies to himself and not to Luke."

Olive shook his head firmly. "No, that's not right at all. Fate has already decided Cyan's path! A set moment in time! He is there in complete harmony with the Son of Suns! . . . the Circle will turn unto its beginning, and the All Times War will begin again."

And thus the Second Desolation will come . . .' The first part of the prophecy has come true, why not the second part?"Â Olive was looking from Corran to Leia, his distress evident.

"What prophecy?" Leia asked.

"The one the Mother Dragon made when Jedis entered into the light! Â 'In the time of greatest despair there shall come one who will bring balance to the Force, and he shall be known as The Son of Suns. Â And beyond twenty turns of the standard sun, the Circle will turn unto its beginning, and the All Times War will begin again. Â And thus the Second Desolation will come, and the Son of Suns will learn the truth of the three parts of the Ether, and the whole universe will feel that truth's effect . . .' There's more, but that is the only part we are told.Â The Son of Suns has already brought balance to the Force, and it was just over twenty standard years ago that he did it.Â Now is the time for the Second Desolation and Master Skywalker has to be there." Â Olive stopped and then narrowed his eyes at Leia. Â "What has made you say these things about the Great Blue? Â What has he done?"

Leia's face as impassive as she answered, "He left Luke. Â He's forsaken his _padmiri for himself and is probably dead for all we know."_

—

Olive's eyes widened drastically, and it seemed to Corran that he turned a slightly paler shade of green.Â "Impossible!Â A _ padmiri cannot survive without his dragon! Â What you say has never, could never, happen. Â You must be wrong!"_

—

"We do know that Cyan is dead, though Luke's version of the story is a lot different than Leia's," Corran explained, stroking Olive's neck to reassure him.

"No, you don't understand!Â Master Skywalker cannot live without Cyan.Â It is a physical and mental impossibility! Â His mind would destroy itself.Â Maybe something happen to Cyan but Master Skywalker couldn't be alive now if Cyan is dead." Olive said firmly.

"Hmm . . ." Corran mumbled absently, scratching his chin. Â "I don't know.Â Luke is strong, and he says he saw Cyan die."

Olive shook his head again.Â "It still can't be. Besides, if Cyan was gone, than another _ padmiri dragon team would have been chosen. Â And none has."_

—

"Well, it's useless to debate this," Leia said briskly, not liking where the conversation was heading.Â She stood and busied herself with brushing pieces of grass off her flight suit. Â "We should be heading back before either of us is missed. Â What are you going to do, Olive?"

Olive turned towards the trees, his eyes slightly hopeful. Suddenly they saw a flash of red and heard a low rumble. Â Olive's crest fell

and he looked up at Corran. "I don't want to stay. They're mad at me, and I don't know what the punishment is for what I've done."

"Then you'd better come back with us. You should ride in my X-Wing with me, I guess. There's more room in my cockpit than in that B-Wing's," Corran said, putting away the med. kit. Olive took a moment, and then nodded slowly. Corran picked him up and then climbed up the ladder hanging off the side of the snub fighter. Leia headed back to her ship and swallowed. Maybe she couldn't trust Olive, perhaps it was too late for him as well.

~~~~~

Luke burst out laughing when Mara abruptly tumbled off her speeder bike to land in a tangled heap on the ground. "That was the most graceful dismount I have ever seen in my entire life!"

"I meant to do that," Mara said firmly, scrambling to her feet. She looked around at the group still sitting on their bikes around her daringly. "I defy any of you to do it better."

"Well, that's not fair," Luke said, his grin broadening. "I've had three times as much as you."

"Yeah, but at least you can hold your liquor. Your wife of many talents seems to be without that particular one," Windy commented.

Camie swung her leg over the side of her speeder and stumbled as she landed, but stayed standing. She turned to regard Windy, swaying slightly. "I don't know. You gotta have a certain amount of respect for someone who can hang out with a group of virtual strangers and let herself go with such abandon . . . abandonen . . . can be so free."

"Aw, and coming from you that's a compliment of the highest degree," Fixer added, jumping off his speeder with considerably more grace and thumping Mara on the back.

"Ompf!" Mara exclaimed as she fell flat on her face. She climbed back to her feet and tried to shove Fixer back but missed and ran into his speeder with a loud thump. "There's no reason to start hittin' me."

Luke came over and threw his arm over Mara's shoulders, guiding her towards the tent that served as his home. "Break it up, you two. Mara's too tanked to make this fight entertaining so save your strength for the hangover, 'cause someone's probably gonna die for this tomorrow."

"That's right!" Mara said, dragging Luke around in a half circle so she could jab her finger into Fixer's chest threateningly. "And when I find out who got me this drunk, I will beat them up so bad, you'll wish you were . . . um, some really bad thing I'll think of tomorrow."

"Yeah. Wait, didn't you get yourself drunk?" Luke asked after a moment's consideration.

Mara slapped herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand so hard she almost knocked herself over again. "Oh, that's right. I forgot. Then I will just have to beat myself up tomorrow, like I said."

"Ok, I'll help," Luke said, guiding her single-mindedly to his tent. "But, to do it properly, we have to get naked in my bed. So let's go."

Mara laughed and put her arm around Luke's waist, nodding. "Um'k." They stumbled into the tent and Luke swiftly picked Mara up around the waist and threw her, giggling, onto the bed. Luke jumped after her enthusiastically, and they slapped each other around, tugging at their clothes, half undressing each other before Luke finally pinned Mara down.

"I have defeated you, Emperor's Hand," Luke said triumphantly, grinning as he pulled the rest of her shirt off with his teeth and tossed it across the room.

Mara pouted and rubbed her bare foot up and down the inside of Luke's thigh. "Darn! I guess that means I'm under your control now."

"Um hum," Luke mumbled, working his way downward. Mara giggled again and then stopped abruptly, thinking about something. Then she punched his arm hard enough to make him sit up and rub the offended limb. "What?"

"I just remembered I don't like being called the Emperor's Hand. Aren't you supposed to know that?" Mara demanded, slipping out from under him.

Luke shrugged. "Um, I'm drunk. You're lucky I remembered your name."

"Good point," Mara yawned. "What were we doing?"

Luke chuckled. "I think you inhaled some of the spice."

"I don't think that was what we were doing."

Luke gently pushed Mara back down to the bed, saying, "As I recall, we \_ were about to have sex, until you forgot." \_

—

"Oh, ok," Mara mumbled just before Luke covered her mouth with his once again. They carried on the kiss for a while until Luke realized Mara wasn't responding. He sat up and snorted in grim amusement. She had fallen asleep.

"You'd think a smuggler would have a higher tolerance for alcohol," Luke commented to himself, lying down next to her. "I'll have to ask Karrde about it the next time I see him." His last words caused a slight frown to appear on his face. Something about Karrde, something he was missing. Suddenly he saw a flash, a feeling of remembered rage. Leia lying on the landing of an opulent stairway surrounded by broken glass, people screaming in the

background.    And then there was Karrde, blaster drawn heading towards him.    Karrde was a danger, he would stop Luke from avenging Cyan.    That couldn't happen; Luke captured the energy from the blaster bolt and used it to send Karrde rolling down the stairs, struggling at first but eventually going limp.    He tumbled past Han, past Mara, and Luke saw horrified expressions on the faces of the people he held most dear.

Luke snapped back to awareness, his eyes resting on the relaxed, sleeping features of his wife, no longer drawn with terror.    He traced his finger down her cheek and Mara smiled, moving towards the source of heat in the cool night.    Luke pulled the light blanket over them and threw his arm over Mara, resting his chin on her shoulder as he had done so many times in their marriage.

It was his first glimpse, the first thing he had managed to pull from that strange fog that clouded the time between the start of the banquet and his confrontation with Pendad, and it was frightening to him to the core.    Had he shoved Han down the stairs too?    What had he done to Mara?    Was that why she wouldn't tell him what had happened?    And was that why it had taken her so long to come?    Had he injured her so much she hadn't been able to leave the medical center?

He nuzzled his face into her tangled hair, breathing the spicy sent deeply, and then released it with a shaky breath.    Automatically it seemed his mind reached out to ask Cyan to tell him the memory and the same cold emptiness that always followed the accidental attempts ripped at his soul.    He sobbed around clenched teeth, pressing close to Mara's body and let his mind succumb to the depressants.

Mara woke up slowly, aware that the mattress she was on was shifting erratically.    Her stomach complained loudly, and Mara suspected that unless the bouncing stopped soon, it would start a rather wet uprising.    She forced her eyes open, though they felt heavy and gummed shut.    Luke was shifting back and forth, his limbs twitching as if he was trying to fight something.    He was mumbling unintelligently and from the pained expression on his face Mara realized he was having a nightmare.

She reflexively reached out to wake him, but stopped herself before she could.    She had been there three days and each night he had a violent nightmare.    When she woke him up he had the look of a dead man and staunchly refused to tell her what he saw.    Compressing her lips, Mara used the Force to probe his mind, slipping in with the ease only their bond could allow.    She searched until she found the vision Luke was seeing and looked upon it herself . . .

—

—    and saw warehouse in Invasec; a section of Coruscant reserved for non-humans during Palpatine's rule.    Though the population in general was fairly homogeneous in present times, Invasec had remained largely "alien".    The building itself was in a state of disrepair, with holes nibbled out of the walls scattered throughout the complex.    The walls and floor were smeared with oil and grime. The battered front doors were unlocked but all other windows and entrances were covered with welded on durasteel and holograms warning all from trespassing.

—  
\_ Luke and Cyan, the dragon still wearing the black leather bridle and saddle that had been custom made for him, followed the directions Leia gave them as precisely as they could.Â But the deeper into the building they traveled, the uneasier they both began to feel, as darkness seemed to collect in front of them.\_

—  
I don't like this\_, Cyan said in Luke's mind.Â Even the granite slugs avoid this place.\_

—  
I know.Â There's a feeling of danger all over\_, Luke responded, using the Force to speak his words as he too was wary of making a noise in the silent, echoy halls.Â Besides, they could communicate far faster this way.Â Cyan took the data card from Luke and scanned the contents.\_

—  
\_ Cyan rumbled softly and let his ridge drop to his neck. Â Perhaps the note is false.Â Perhaps someone forged it to get us to come here.\_

—  
No, it has Leia's personal code on it.Â You'd need to have an expert slicer to get to it\_, Luke disagreed.Â He snorted and added.Â Anyway, if it is a trap, it's a little too late to turn back now.\_

—  
Yes, I suppose it is\_, Cyan shrugged and then his ridge rose up as he caught sight of a large set of double doors .Â I think we're supposed go in there next.\_

—  
\_ They entered into a massive storeroom lined with unmarked crates of various sizes, all wrapped in plastic.Â The room seemed relatively unremarkable aside from the carbon-freezing chamber of unusually extensive diameter in the center of the room, the golden light it cast created a dismal atmosphere.Â The note instructed for them to cross to the adjoining doors and keep going; their destination would become obvious once they were there. Â Giving the chamber a wide berth, Luke and Cyan crossed the storeroom. Â They opened the next set of doorsâ€”\_

—  
\_ â€”To reveal an armed man of heavy build blocking their way. Â He had a curly mustache and beard, hiding most of his features besides the scar running part way across his face, forcing his left eyelid halfway closed.Â He had on a vest that looked like there'd been a halfhearted attempt to clean it, but it had failed miserably; it covered a black muscle shirt that looked even worse. Â His brown

trouser cut off just before the red rawhide boots. Â A wickedly curved knife was sheathed in a holster strapped just below his knee.Â The thing that caught Luke's attention the most was the blaster held in his left hand pointed at his chest.\_

—

\_ "Now you jus' go righ' back into that thar room, Master Skywalker, an' nobody gets hurt," the man said with a thick accent.\_

—

\_ "Except maybe me," Luke added, keeping his hands well away from his sides, but using the Force to unclip the hostler for his own blaster.\_

—

Too bad your lightsaber isn't finished yet.

No kidding.

\_ Luke let his senses stretch out throughout the room and found at least a dozen other minds around him.Â Then he noticed the area directly behind him was blocked, but there was something distinctly familiar about it.Â He traded glances with Cyan and they both set to work uncovering it.\_

—

\_ The man nodded in acknowledgment after receiving a signal from someone behind the Luke and Cyan's line of sight and gestured for them to start moving backwards. Â "An' jus' so you know, you try somethin' an' I'll shoot ya. Â An' tell that thar pet of yours if he tries anything I'll still be shootin' you."\_

—

\_ "I can understand you, you know," Cyan growled, baring his teeth and letting his crest flatten the rest of the way against his neck. Â The man jerked in surprise when Cyan spoke, obviously under the impression that he was a simple pack animal. Taking advantage, Luke used the moment's distraction to reach for his blaster. Â He was thwarted when whatever it was behind him anticipated the move and took his blaster before he could reach it. Â They turned around to see who it was just in time to see the blaster go flying through the air into the hand of . . . \_

—

\_ "I'm sorry, Luke.Â But I can't let you do this," Leia said calmly.\_

—

\_ Luke looked around and storeroom and saw at least two dozen men he suspected were mercenaries converging on the group. Â "What are you doing?" he asked, incredulous.\_

—

\_ "I'm saving your life," Leia said as if it was an obvious as his own blaster now pointed at its owner.Â "I can't let you go on this mission with that thing waiting for the perfect time to strike."\_

\_

\_ "Cyan could have killed me anytime and no one would have blamed him," Luke said deliberately, eyeing the blaster and wondering if it was still set on stun. Leia couldn't be desperate enough to kill him to keep him out of Cyan's clutches?\_

\_

\_ Leia sighed and shook her head sadly.Â "You can be so naive sometimes.Â He's just trying to lull you into a false sense of security.Â The only reason he hasn't struck yet is because I haven't joined the band wagon."\_

\_

\_ "If you were to accuse me no one would believe you because of your bias," Cyan commented.\_

\_

\_ Leia pointed at him but still kept her eyes on Luke. Â "You see?Â He's planned it all out.Â I've tried reasoning with you but it's obvious you're no longer in possession of your own mind. Â But don't worry, Luke.Â If you're in there and you can hear me, I'm not going to give him the chance to hurt you.Â Move the dragon into the carbon-freeze chamber!"\_

\_

\_ "No!" Luke shouted, using the Force to throw the first man up against the wall, his impact creating an audible crack. Â Luke called his blaster back to him from Leia's slackened grip, but it got about half way there before Leia stopped it. Â It was a futile battle, there was no way she could beat him when using the Force and she quickly lost her untrained grip. Â Luke held out his hand for the blaster as Cyan curled around him, shielded him from the stun bolts being shot at them by the other mercenaries.\_

\_

\_ Without warning there was a searing pain in Luke's leg and he lost his concentration. Â The blaster clattered to the floor as Cyan screamed and dropped to the ground.Â Luke looked down but there was nothing wrong with his leg.Â Then Cyan clambered back to his feet to reveal a long line of acid burning down his right flank, black blood oozing from the wound. Â He dropped awkwardly to all fours and shifted his weight away from the injured limb, moaning in pain.Â Luke spun around to stare at Leia in shock and horror.\_

\_

\_ "We can kill him slow with the acid guns or quick with the carbon-freeze," Leia said, calling the blaster back to her hand and

catching it in a strong grip.Â She didn't even bother to point it at him.Â "He only has a 3.7% chance of surviving the freezing process and now he's injured, which probably amounts to no chance.Â His mind will freeze, it'll break the bond and won't give him the change to drag you down with him."\_

—

\_ Luke stared at her in total abhorrence, too stunned to do anything as the mercenaries directed them to the carbon-freezing chamber. Â A quick glance around the room proved that almost all of the mercenaries had acid guns.Â Just before they lowered Cyan in, one of the men grabbed his paw and ripped his talons down Luke's arm before the dragon could react, cutting deep into the bone. Â Luke gasped and clutched at his arm while Cyan swung his free paw at the man's face, leaving two deep gashes. Â The man fell to the floor and screamed in pain, covering his bloody face.Â Â Two other men dragged him away from the snarling dragon.\_

—

\_ "That's a just in case thing, really," Leia said as Luke was forcibly pulled to the side.Â She stood next to him and watched as they maneuvered Cyan.Â "Cyan's done such a good job, people might not understand."\_

—

\_ "If what you're doing is right, than you wouldn't need to hire mercenaries and you wouldn't have to make up a cover story!" Luke whispered as they lowered Cyan in.Â "Please think about what you're doing.Â It's murder! Â Youâ€"you don't even have any evidence! Â It's all suspicion."\_

—

\_ Leia glared at him, as if he purposely did not understand. Â "That's because he hasn't done anything yet. Â And I'm keeping him from having the chance."\_

—

\_ "If that were true, then we should have killed Han the moment we met him. Â And Lando, and Karrde, and Mara, and the Force only knows how many other people we trust who are more suspicious than Cyan!"\_

—

\_ Leia turned his head to face her.Â "That's exactly it!Â There's nothing suspicious about him!Â No one's that clean, that perfect."\_

—

\_ "Then you should have shot me when we first met," Luke groaned.\_

—



\_ "I'm just trying to help you.Â I know you can't see that now, but you will," Leia said, patting him on the shoulder. Â "You'll see.Â Don't worry, you'll understand everything once you're free from his influence."\_

\_

\_ "Leia stop!" Luke pleaded, feeling his pulse quicken as he realized nothing was going to stop her.Â "Leia, please, please don't do this!Â You know what it's like to lose someone to carbon freeze! Â How can you do this to me?Â Especially when you know it will kill him?! Â Great stars, Leia, you're not a murderer!" Â The gears shuttered to a halt as Cyan reached the bottom and Leia gestured for the lever to be pulled.Â The first man limped over and sneered behind his beard in satisfaction.\_

\_

\_ "This is different.Â Han loved me and I loved him back.Â I don't even think Cyan's capable of love.Â He's just a hungry predator that likes to play with his food before he eats it." Â The man grabbed the lever and turned back to watch. Â \_

\_

\_ "Stop this, Leia!" Luke cried, his voice getting hoarse. Â \_

\_

\_ Cyan keened and looked up at Luke sadly.Â "Good-by, Luke.Â See you on the other side."\_

\_

\_ Luke moaned and shook his head, feeling his breath quicken as the death of his friend approached.Â He said desperately, "Stop!Â Stop please! Â Think about what you're doing!"Â The man pulled the lever.Â "You can'tâ€"NOOOOOO!"Â His shout was lost in the hissing cloud of icy air that swirled around Cyan, freezing his body in a split second, cutting off his pain wracked shriek. Â Luke felt a horrible rendering in his soul as Cyan's touch was ripped away from him; his back arched, his head was thrown back as his whole world was sucked out from beneath him.Â It seemed like he stayed like that forever, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, he couldn't make a sound for fear of allowing this to be real, to accept that Leia had betrayed him and Cyan was gone forever.\_

\_

\_ The sudden silence was broken by the screaming hydraulics as the block of frozen carbonite was lifted hissing and popping from the chamber. Â Luke forced himself to look, but he still could not breath, could not speak.Â The mist slipped serenely away to reveal Cyan's contorted body, stretched in much the same position Luke had been in seconds ago.Â The Jedi could find no source of feeling, of life in the solid block. Â His lungs were burning, his mind screaming in pain. Â He forced one ragged breath down his throat, the tears finally streaming down his cheeks.Â He looked at Leia with her small smile, her expression of victory, and let all the air release from his lungs, along with his will to live. Â It's real.Â

He's gone, he's gone, gone . . . \_

\_

\_ He crumbled to the ground like an old rag doll, his heart slowing with no encouragement from its owner. His last breath bushed gently passed his lips. ^ His vision was stained a blood red and as long agonizing seconds passed, his world got darker and darker.^ He heard Leia screaming at the mercenaries, then shouting at him not to let himself succumb to Cyan's evil.\_

\_

\_ He could feel his life ending, in the exact, detailed way only a Jedi could know.^ Leia was screaming and he had the odd sensation of moving but the physical world no longer mattered to him.^ He wanted to disembodify himself before he died, so he could say good-bye to Mara, and Han, and everyone else he was leaving behind, but he found himself unable dredge up the energy. ^ Cyan was waiting for him; he could hear him calling his name. ^ Except there was something wrong, there was something pulling him back.^ And he realized that Cyan wasn't calling from ahead of him, but behind.^ Calling him back^|\_

\_

Mara snapped back to awareness just as Luke finally awoke from the nightmare, crying out and sitting up, reflexively grabbing Mara for support. ^ He let his forehead drop to her shoulder, gasping for air. ^ Mara stroked his hair and murmured reassurances, while at the same time trying to calm her emotions.^ She was right with him in the nightmare, every feeling, every thought was shared, and the sheer volume of grief and pain the memory brought about rattled Mara deeply.^ She was so distracted that she didn't even notice when Luke lifted his head to gaze at her with shadowy eyes.

"You're crying," Luke whispered weakly, wiping the hot tears from her cheeks before Mara even realized they were there.

"I^"I'm sorry," Mara said, her voice just as shaky as his. ^ "I shouldn't have intruded^"

Luke smiled humorlessly and shook his head. ^ "No, I don't mind.^ I don't mind \_you seeing. ^ I just . . . I don't like to remember."\_

\_

"I understand," Mara said, her voice rich with compassion. ^ They lay back down, embracing each other for mutual support.

Luke stared off into space, unable to go back to sleep. ^ Eventually he turned back to Mara, who seemed to be sharing a similar problem.^ "You know," he said into the silence, making Mara jump, "sometimes I think I won't wake up in time. ^ I'll keep dreaming and I'll die like I tried to there. ^ It worries me, until I realize how wonderful that would be."

"Wonderful?" Mara exclaimed softly, lifting her head to better look at him. ^ "Not for me, it wouldn't."

"But, I would be with Cyan, and old Ben, and aunt Beru. And Biggs, father, and maybe even see what my mother looked like. Â I'd like to at least see her face, know who gave me life," Luke said almost absently.

Mara gave him a rough shake, bringing him out of his reverie. Â "Don't talk like that!Â There are people here for you to be with.Â Namely me!Â Cyan wouldn't want you to quit just like that.Â So don't disappoint him!"

"I know, that's why I stay.Â I don't want to fail him, and I don't want to fail the people here. Â But sometimes it's so hard . . ."  
Luke explained.

Mara brought her face closer to his, her expression fierce. Â "That's why you have all of us!Â To be with you when things get hard. Â To help you through to easier times. Â You just have to hold on.Â I just \_know things will get better eventually."\_

—

"Well," Luke commented, smiling with real humor this time, "when you say it, I know it will come true."

> <p class="MsoBodyText"> Chapter XIV<p>

> <p class="MsoBodyText"> "So you brought him back with you?" Gavin asked in amusement.<p>

"Well, we couldn't leave him there.Â I mean, it was sort of our fault he got into this situation anyway," Corran explained, watching as Olive playfully chased his son around the tarmac. Â Mirax had come to greet him when he landed and brought their son with her.Â The rest of Rogue Squadron was there too, most of them to offer support in case Leia changed her mind and decided to add his leaving Tatooine while grounded to the list of charges against him.

Mirax grunted, keeping her arm around her husband's waist. Â "More like Leia's fault.Â You have to wonder though, why would the dragons only send Carmine after her?Â I mean, with the effort that went into their attack on you and the others, you'd think they would send a couple at least."

"Cyan said the Mother Dragon uses methods prescribed by Fate, which means we can't always understand why she uses them. Â Perhaps they never meant to kill Leia, just try and teach her something. Â They weren't really trying to kill us, it was to make sure Luke had gotten the whole lesson.Â Had she met Olive before going to K'ti'ma, I don't think she would have been nearly so cordial," Corran commented.

Hobbie watched as Olive tripped over his wing and went through a series of unwilling summersaults.Â "Then why force Olive to come here?Â He can't be of much use."

"Maybe he's a replacement," Mirax suggested. Â "You know, fill in for Cyan since he's gone now."

"I think they could have picked a better candidate," Wedge said dryly. "Have you talked to him yet? He's . . . well, kind of cowardly."

"I know. He had to ask me on the way back if what he had done was brave, and when I commented that he could have gotten himself killed, he almost fainted," Corran told them.

Janson rolled his eyes. "I can't quite imagine Cyan fainting."

"Or having to ask whether or not something he had done was brave," Mirax added. "That dragon had the ego of a pilot."

"Well, Olive certainly gets along well with Valin," Corran commented.

Any further comment on the new arrival was interrupted by an ensign running up and handing Corran a data pad. "This was just sent from President Organa Solo, Captain Horn. She said you should read it immediately."

"Here we go," Corran muttered as he scanned the document. He frowned for a second and then looked up and grinned. "Leia's dropping the charges. I'm not grounded anymore."

"That's good to know. Intelligence just reported that Luke might be planning a major strike soon. He's buying up supplies and ammunition like there's no tomorrow," Wedge said, shaking his head.

Inyri's eyes suddenly lit up. She gestured towards Olive, "Maybe we should figure out a way for Luke to meet Olive. It mightâ€"

"Shove him the rest of the way over the edge," Corran finished firmly. "No way. He already told me he's hallucinating things, and I don't even want to know about the stuff that he's not telling me. Having another dragon suddenly pop up might push him all the way."

"Or Luke might trust Olive enough for him to convince Luke to surrender." Mirax held up her hand to forestall Corran's newly formed objection. "I know you don't want him near Leia, but his getting help doesn't have to involve her. We take him some place, don't tell Leia where until Luke is well enough to face her. Who knows? Maybe Olive can help rehabilitate him too."

Everyone else nodded in agreement, so Corran sighed and shrugged. "I guess I've been out voted. But whatever we do, we have to do it soon. We don't know when this big battle Wedge is talking about will be happening, but without Luke there, it might not have to happen at all."

It was decided that Corran would go, since he already knew his way around the canyon, Gavin would go as well since he knew more about the planet. Mirax decided to come since she would best be able to talk their way out of a dangerous situation, or at least use her contacts to buy their way out. Lastly, of course, came Olive.

They took an air speeder most of the way out, but stopped before they

got within sensor range of the canyon. ^ They walked the rest of the way, ducking behind a sand dune every time a speeder bike or other transport would fly overhead. ^ When he noticed that the small dragon was having trouble keeping up, Corran insisted on carrying him the rest of the way. So Olive climbed into Corran's backpack and let his head pop out so he could see what was going on.

When they finally reached the canyon, Corran took them through an emergency exit, and then through the thick shadows at the base of the canyon wall until they reached Luke's command tent.^ Getting as close as he dared, Corran listened intently, hoping Luke was still there and not at the impromptu bar set up on the other side of the canyon.

"What does it matter if he's at the bar? ^ It'll be easier to smuggle Olive into a crowded room filled with drunken patrons without being noticed than a tent with only a few sober people in it," Gavin commented softly.

Corran compressed his lips and answered without looking at either of them, "If Luke's already drinking and smoking we could stick Cyan right in front of him and he wouldn't know it."

"It couldn't be that bad," Mirax argued. ^ Corran regarded her steadily with an expression that said it was worse.^ "Oh."

Suddenly they heard the unmistakable sound of Mara's rippling laughter coupled with the sound of a tent flap being thrown back. ^ They ducked back behind the tent just in time as Luke pulled Mara to the side, letting his hands brush teasingly against her sides as he grinned mischievously at her.

"Aw, c'mon you guys, they're not going to be done for, like, an hour," Windy wined.^ "Let's go without them."

Luke appeared slightly offended by that comment as he called to his unseen companions, "An hour?^ What are you talking about?^ What I have in mind will only take five minutes!"

"Not what \_I have in mind," Mara purred, letting her hands slip under his loose shirt.\_

—

Luke growled in response before he called out, "Ok, I'll catch up in an hour!"

Corran motioned for Olive to jump out of his backpack, gesturing for him to be as silent as possible.^ "This is our chance.^ Go to it, Olive."

Olive watched Luke and Mara for a second and then slowly shook his head. ^ "I don't like this idea any more. ^ He has what he needs right now.^ I'll make it worse."

"No, you won't," Mirax said soothingly, kneeling beside the small dragon. ^ "You can help him to get all better, to fulfill the prophecy. ^ Remember?"

Olive nodded, though uncertainly, then made his way around the corner

with his crest flattened against his neck and his stubby tail held low. "When he was only a few metres away, the emerald dragon let out a tiny, fearful warble.

Gavin would swear later that Luke jumped at least five feet in the air. "He stumbled away from the meek dragon, his face as pale as the snows of Hoth." Mara turned to see what had distressed her husband, his deep alarm driving her to draw her lightsaber. "Then she saw Olive crouched on the ground, looking for all the universe like a frightened nerf." For a moment she thought Cyan had been reborn and it had just taken him a while to get back when she realized that this one was an emerald, and had crystal eyes.

"Who are you?" Mara demanded.

The dragon seemed to shrink into an even smaller ball at the harsh tone of her voice. "My name is Olive. "I'm here to help Luke."

"You can help me just fine by leaving," Luke said, his voice thick with emotion. "He turned and rushed away, a hand covering his mouth to try and keep his rising grief from spilling over.

Mara turned to follow him, but then stopped and looked at the dragon, wondering if she should call somebody to deal with him. "It was then that she caught sight of Corran crouching by the corner of the tent.

"Corran? What in the void do you think you're doing?" Mara hissed, stalking towards him and causing Olive to yelp and run behind Corran's back.

Corran stood, moving back to make room for Mara behind the tent. "Don't blame me, it wasn't my idea."

"But you went along with it? You know better. The Force only knows what that just did to him," Mara snarled.

"We know, Mara. "We wanted to help"" Mirax began.

"Well, like Luke said, you can help best by leaving. "And keep that dragon as far away from him as possible," Mara interrupted, pointing at Olive. "She turned and ran, knowing Corran could find his own way out. "She found Luke's presence in his own tent and rushed there. "She found him collapsed on the floor, his head pillowed in his arms. "She knelt beside him, sliding her fingers through his sandy hair to get his attention. "When he looked up at her, his eyes seemed to shine with something she had never seen before. "He lay his head down on her lap, his body limp with shock. "Mara stroked his cheek and hair, not saying a word. "There wasn't much she could have said.

Eventually he stopped crying and Mara thought he had fallen asleep. Then he spoke, his words soft, broken, and puzzled. "Why did that hurt so much? "He didn't even look like Cyan. "Or"or even act like him."

"Well, I think maybe you have a deep wound on your soul where Cyan was attached to you, and now you don't know how to close it. "Seeing that dragon was like pouring salt on that wound, just as it is

for you every other time something reminds you of Cyan," Mara explained slowly, coming to this conclusion even as she was saying it.

"Is this what it's going to be like until I die?" Luke asked, sitting up and regarding Mara with red rimmed eyes. "Mara could only shake her head and shrug. "She had no answer for him." Luke stared at her and then smiled hesitantly. "I don't think it will." You came back." You always come back and I still can't figure out why." But, as long as you do, I know I won't be alone."

"Luke, I will \_always come back to you," Mara said, breathlessly. Luke cupped her face in his hand, gently tracing her lips with his thumb. "Leaning forward, he brushed her lips with his, meaning it more as a physical expression of what her being there meant to him. "As soon as they touched they both reacted not in a surprising way, the kiss quickly becoming more than a simple thank you. "Luke pulled away and stared at her for a second, as if considering whether or not he wanted to continue in the direction they were travelling. "Mara stayed silent, letting Luke decide. "His decision soon became obvious.\_

—

Mara gasped as Luke pulled her shirt over her head. "He cut her exclamation off by covering her mouth with his, keeping her arms above her head as he worked his way down her neck. "Mara let out a soft moan, struggling mildly against his grip, wanting to feel his skin." Luke laughed softly, but refused to let go, moving downward." Mara gasped louder and writhed against him. "

She looked down when Luke abruptly stopped, staring at something in the corner. "He returned to eye level and his grip on her arms slackened. "Mara followed his gaze and saw nothing there.

"What is it?" she murmured.

Luke glanced back at her quickly and then at the corner again, giving a small shake of his head." Mara nipped his ear and then trailed her tongue down his neck, electing an almost animalistic groan." He closed his eyes as their bodies began to move in unison, even though they weren't even completely undressed." Mara saw him force his eyes open, trying to keep his attention on the corner. This time he frowned, and then looked at Mara again.

"What's there?" Mara asked again.

"Nothing," Luke said with a smile, "nothing at all. "Not anymore, I have you here."

Later, when they lay stretched out on the bed, Luke stayed awake watching Mara's peaceful slumber." He was tired, a combination of the physical and emotional strain their consummation had produced." He knew he would fall asleep soon, but he relaxed and gloried in the vision he had seen. "He knew the specter had been of his own making, but that didn't matter." He knew what it meant. "It meant Mara was staying and he didn't need anyone else anymore, and that's why the specter had left.

In the final moments of awareness before he drifted off into blissful

oblivion, Luke relived that image, in its indefinable beauty.

He had seen Cyan sitting in the corner.Â  
Smiling.

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

"Kyp?Â What are you doing here?" Corran asked.Â He hung his towel around his neck after he stepped off the treadmill. Â He leaned against the handles and regarded the Jedi Knight with interest.Â Kyp was almost a head taller than him; and with his long, jet-black curly hair and piercing eyes, Kyp commended quite the presence.Â Corran had to keep a smile from appearing on his face when he remembered when Kyp first met Cyan.Â Kyp had come to the same conclusion most people did upon first meeting the dragonâ€"that he was a pack animal or a servant.Â Cyan had responded with some rather scathing comments about Kyp's appearance and ability to perform in bed, and then a cryptic remark about how annoying Kyp's "shouting in the Force" was getting.

"Leia asked me to come," Kyp answered while Corran was remembering the incident. Â "She wanted some diplomatic assistance."

Corran slowly raised an eyebrow as Kyp made his way to the punching bag. Â "So she called you?Â No offence, Kyp, but diplomacy was never your strong point."

"I know," Kyp shrugged, removing his cloak to reveal the muscle shirt and lose pants underneath, better suited for exercising. Â "That's why I tried to suggest Cilghal. Â But Leia said I'd be better suited for what she has in mind."

"Really . . ." Corran commented almost absently. Â "I wonder what she's up to with that."

Kyp snorted.Â "Calm down, Corran. Â You're making it sound like Leia's the Emperor or something."

"Close enough," Corran muttered.Â He glanced at his wrist crono and then sucked air through his teeth. Â "Hutt spit, I gotta go pick up Valin. Â Look, just don't take everything Leia tells you at face value, ok?"

"Sure," Kyp said as Corran backed away towards the door. Â Corran paused, for Kyp hadn't sounded as though he believed him, but another glance at his crono forestalled any further attempts to convince his fellow Jedi.

Corran raced out of the gym and sprinted down the sand-covered street. Â He had been reviewing their failed mission of the previous evening in his head, and had quickly lost tack of the time. Â He stopped in front of the school and looked around in puzzlement. Â It had been his turn to pick up Valin, but his son wasn't at their usual meeting place.

He knew he shouldn't be worried.Â After all, Valin had insisted on bringing Olive with him to school for show-and-tell. Â When ten minutes had passed and Vain still hadn't shown up, Corran went in the school to look around.Â Eventually he found the office and was stunned to find his son's presence there.Â Walking in, the secretary



directed him to the principal's office where an extremely remorse Valin and Olive sat beside a boy with a small compress on his arm.

"Uh oh.Â What happened?" Corran asked, seeing the Rodian principal's flushed face.

"Captain Horn," the Rodian greeted him though clenched teeth, "sorry we could not contact you sooner.Â We had trouble finding your comlink number.Â Please sit down."

Corran obediently sat down next to Valin, trying to catch his eye, but his son refused to look up from the floor.Â The Rodian continued, "Your son's pet attacked young Ferno here without provocation."

"Attacked?Â That's not right, sir. Â Olive is very considerate, he would think to do something like that without a good reason," Corran said emphatically.

"But he did!Â I was just playing with Valin and that stupid lizard came over and spit on me!" Ferno whined, sniffing and wiping his nose on the back of his sleeve.

Corran turned to look at Valin and Olive. Â "Is this true?" he asked.

Valin glanced at Ferno, who gave him a stern look, and slowly nodded his head.Â Olive turned from one to the other, looking confused.Â But then he saw the angry expression the principal's face again and shrank into the chair he was occupying.Â Corran narrowed his eyes and knelt in front of Olive, not believing their reaction for a minute. Â "Olive, tell me what happened."

"I was trying to help Valin," Olive said very softly. Â Corran nodded and scratched Olive behind his horn to encourage the dragon.Â "He was playing ball with another girl and Ferno took it and pushed Valin because he wanted to play with her.Â Valin tried to get the ball back but Ferno pushed him again.Â I tried to get one of the playground monitor people but all they did was pet my head and call me a cute lizard before walking off. Â So I tried to get the ball from Ferno but he started throwing stuff at us.Â He cut Valin with a rockâ€"it hurt him!Â I couldn't let Valin get hurt, you said to make sure he was safe.Â So I spat at Ferno.Â It wasn't much, I didn't even mean to hit him but he moved right when I did it. Â I'm sorry Corn, this is the second time I failed you." Â Olive moaned dejectedly and lowered his eyes, tucking his tail between his legs and squishing into a tighter crouch.

Corran turned around and leveled a glare at the redundant Rodian. Â "Perhaps you should call in the playground monitor, and not my son."

"Well, that pet of yours still attacked him," the Rodian stated, slapping his hand against the desk, "and I won't have that in my school."

"And I won't have my son terrorized while at school either. Â Olive is not a pet, he is a \_ trusted friend of the family, and until I know that Valin won't be abused on the school grounds, Olive is going

to be coming in with him." Â Corran held up his hand when the Rodian opened his mouth to protest. Â "I will speak with him about what behavior is appropriate and what he cannot do to others unless in extreme circumstances, but he will not be punished for protecting my son."Â Corran picked up the stunned dragon and took his son's hand as Valin shot Ferno a victorious look.\_

—

When they got outside, Corran took Olive and sat down on a bench, plopped the dragon down beside him and gave him a serious look. Â "Olive, I do appreciate you being so dedicated to protecting Valin, but you gotta remember that Ferno is just a child. Â A mean bully, but a child and you can't attack him like that. Â You have the unfair advantage of being, you know, a natural born predator with tons of built in weapons.Â Ferno's just one of us lowly humans who don't have all that neat stuff."

"I'm sorry Corn.Â I'll do better next time," Olive said solemnly.

"Well," Corran commented, smiling slightly, "after what you did today, I don't think Ferno's likely to try and take Valin's ball again anytime soon."

"Syma doesn't even like him," Olive added, looking at Valin now. Â "She told me when I was helping her to reach the shelf to get the milk tray."Â Corran chuckled when the comment caused Valin's face to light up.

"Really?Â That'll show him," Valin said with a grin.Â He glanced at his father and then ran over and gave Olive a big hug around the neck. Â "Thank you, Ollie.Â You're a cool friend!"Â Olive purred in pleasure and hugged the human child back.

Corran was about to wipe away a mock tear when his comlink suddenly beeped. Â He pulled it out of his pocket.Â "Horn here."

"Return to base, Captain Horn.Â Rogue Squadron has been ordered into the air.Â There's massive rebel activity sou'west of Mos Eisley," the voice on the other end said urgently.

"I'll be right there," Corran responded, picking up his son and rushing off.

> <br> Chapter XV

"You're late, Captain Horn," Wedge commented as Corran rushed into the hanger with his flight suit still partially undone and only one boot on. Â He stopped beside Wedge, hopped on the booted foot and tried to pull his other boot on with one hand while he saluted with the other.

"Sorry, General, I had to drop Valin off at home," Corran gasped, finally succeeding in pulling the boot on.Â "What's going on?"

Wedge frowned at a monitor.Â "I'm not sure.Â The rebels moved every piece of their working AT-ST's, battle tanks, and air speeders to one place and set up all their turbolaser batteries behind it. Â Then they dug a huge hole, put a huge pile of old machinery in it, and pulled back until they were behind the turbolaser batteries. Â

They've been sitting there for the past two hours, waiting."

"Did they plant something in the hole besides old machinery? Â Perhaps there's a bomb there or something else they're just waiting to go into effect." Corran suggested.

"Someone already thought of that.Â Preliminary scans haven't told us anything useful so far," Wedge shrugged and then gestured to the centre of the hanger where the technicians were busily getting the air speeders ready.Â "I want Rogue Squadron to do a fly by and drop some scanners in, maybe we can find out what they're up to."

Within minutes they were in the air, the air speeders, with increased shielding, made their way to the site quickly.Â Corran readied himself, waiting for the turbolasers to open up on them, but he was surprised when they just followed their flight path as the air speeders hugged the terrain, Corran's flight dipping when they reached the hole in order for Caspin to drop the sensor package. Â Then they blasted back in the direction they had come, veering sharply away from the rebel encampment.Â Wedge waited tensely though the whole exercise, more disturbed than anything by the rebels complete inaction against them so far. Â He paced as the air speeders returned to the tarmac and the officers around him pored over the sensor data.Â Finally, the officer in charge came to report.

"Nothing but a pile of scrap metal, sir," Chief Lieutenant Rew 'lakTa said. Â He was rather bulky for a Twi'lek, which was why his instructor had been surprised when he chose to go into sciences instead of infantry. Â Wedge quite liked him; he had the blunt honesty of an infantry officer, but the brains to make him quite effective in his field. Â "Hell, some of it is scrap left over from our own fighters and weapons. Â I don't know what good it's doing there, but the rebels sure seem intent on keeping a sharp eye on it."

Wedge sat down in his command chair and tapped the data pad with Tycho's report, which contained similar information, against the armrest. Â He scratched his chin and thought for a minute. Â "I don't like them sitting out there. Â Intelligence says that Luke's out there with them, but only a select few know what he's up to and they won't say a word." Â Wedge was silent again for a time, absently tapping the data pad before he made a decision.Â "They're up to something, and I don't like them being this close to Mos Eisley while they're doing whatever the hell it is.Â Let's move out to meet them.Â They seem to be waiting for something, let's not disappoint them."

If what they were waiting for was a massive armed response to their digging a hole in the ground, Rew 'lakTa thought, then they certainly \_ wouldn't be disappointed.Â Some thought that General Antilles was just being paranoid, but as Rew viewed the mass of turbolaser batteries perched on the dune, all seemingly pointed at him, he decided that the Admiral had taken quite prudent action. Rew was walking cautiously towards the hole as he and several other officers prepared to retrieve the scanners.Â They shouldn't be worried, Wedge had brought all the Imperial Walkers, four dozen speeder bikes, a dozen Logan V.1 battle tanks and fifteen mounted turbolaser batteries. Even that couldn't shake the unfortunate fact that if the rebels were protecting this hole, Rew and his people would be the

first to be shot at.\_

—

Rew took a grappling gun and pointed it at the ground three metres before the edge of the hole, so if it started to slide forward, he would have some time before it came completely lose.Â The other five men who were coming with him did the same and they all walked to the edge.Â Rew looked in and frowned at the pile of rubble, realizing there was a pattern to it.

"Command, there's something odd about the rubble," Rew said, pulling out his comlink.Â "It seems to spell something, though it's kind of hard to see."

"What does it say?" Wedge asked.

Rew squinted at it for a second and then he felt his face turn a paler shade of green.Â "It says, 'Got ya', sir." Suddenly, Rew heard a click from underneath him, accompanied by a low humming. Â "Uh oh."

The first mines went off instantly vaporizing Rew and his underlings, moving outward in a wave of destruction that obliterated two supply transports, a squad of Stormtroopers, and another squad of New Republic footmen. Â It hit one of the hover beds containing five turbolaser batteries, taking out the repulsors on the front half. Â That end hit the broiling sand; the turbolasers slid forward and crushed more equipment.Â As soon as this happened the rebel batteries opened up, adding to the mayhem.

"\_Sith spawn!" Wedge swore. Â He was well beyond the ring of destruction but he moved behind one of the pre prepared barricades to avoid the occasional turbolaser blast that got through the front lines.Â Leia, Han and Kyp were already waiting there for him.\_

—

"Well, that was clever," Leia commented dryly. Â "Why the hell didn't we detect the mines, and why didn't any of them go off while that team was walking towards the bloody hole?"

Wedge shrugged, hurriedly tapping out orders on a data pad and shoving it towards an ensign.Â "Mines are hard to detect since they only turn on when they're activated. Â We were looking for working equipment. Â The rest of the mines were probably programmed to go off only when the first set was triggered.Â Though you are right, quite clever."

"I suppose we shouldn't expect any less from Luke," Han grunted. Â "What do we do now?"

"You two stay right here, I'll coordinate this. Â I don't know why you insisted on coming anyway," Wedge muttered, ducking out of their relatively safe spot to sprint over to a commander frantically waving at him.

"Why \_are we here, Leia?" Kyp asked, fingering his lightsaber.Â "I want to help as much as the next guy, but there isn't really all that



"Oh! I-ah-it's nothing. Â Just a little off today," Mara stuttered, disconcerted to the point where she just recited everything from the vision.

Luke tightened his grip a little protectively.Â "You can stay behind if you want.Â Deak can coordinate the squadrons." He nipped her ear and whispered, "I know this war has never sat well with you, and I know you've tried to hide it from me all this time. Â It's all right, though.Â After this, I have a feeling it will all be over."

"Yes, I think you're right," Mara murmured, the cold feeling of the vision returning full force.

"Thank you, thank you for coming here," Luke continued, pulling her as close to his body as he could, his words so low Mara almost couldn't hear them over the wine of repulsor coils. "You almost make me forget about that empty spot. Â It doesn't echo so much when you're around. Â I was lost without you."Â He pressed his cheek against hers and Mara clasped his hands in hers, feeling them tremble.

Suddenly they were interrupted by a siren screaming, sending everyone around them scurrying for their speeders or gun turrets set up on a nearby rise.Â Luke started running too, pulling Mara along and giving her a gentle push and a small slap on her butt before jumping on his modified bike and revving the engine.Â Mara gave him a surprised and appropriately outraged glare and got a grin and a wink in response. Â Rolling her eyes to the sky, she jumped on her speeder and blasted after Luke when he took off without waiting. Â She saw everyone else un-holstered their blast sticks so she pulled hers out too.Â They sped towards the hill and went over the crest.

They flashed by the firing turbolasers quickly, but Mara ignored them. Â She moved her speeder behind and to the right of Luke's, glancing at her built in display that showed her the position of all the speeders now heading out.Â Beside her Mara saw one of their speeders explode in a fiery ball when some of the slowly increasing return fire hit it and the dot representing it on the display winked out, along with several others.Â She felt Luke noticeably wince in the Force, and looked at his pained expression as they finally reached the front lines.Â He flicked his blast stick on and struck a stormtrooper as he passed him, almost taking off his head.

Luke steered his speeder deeper into the Republic lines.Â He could feel Leia's presence there.Â She had avoided blaster bolts, mines, and all other attempts Luke had made to kill her from a distance, but not this time. Â He was though with avoiding her. Â It was why he was leading the speeder attack against all reasons to the contrary.Â He turned his speeder into a small clearing in the machinery as Mara veered to the right to hit a large group of soldiers.

Then he felt it. Â A probe, light at first, but harder as it tried to perpetrate Luke's thick level of concentration.Â The probe broke though and Luke instinctively threw up Force guards to protect himself.Â The moment he did, the familiar pain returned; it, added with the probe, was enough to make him fall off his speeder bike.

It wasn't until he was about to hit the sand that he finally realized

the person probing him was Kyp Durren.

"By the cold black void!" Kyp hissed, clutching at his head as Luke's pain coursed through the temporary bond. He winced as he saw Luke slam into the ground, gradually roll to a stop and lay deathly still. "Damn it! Mara was right, Luke's burned himself out."

Leaving Leia and Han behind the relative safety of the barricade, Kyp sprinted to where Luke's body had fallen. Leia watched, wringing her hands as Kyp checked out the extent of his former Master's injuries. Then Leia heard the approaching whine of repulsor coils as another speeder neared. She swore and pulled out her blaster as she realized Kyp was completely out in the open.

To her relief Kyp had already noticed the incoming speeder, and knew who was piloting it. He ignited his lightsaber just as the driver jumped off her speeder and ignited her own.

Mara landed in a crouch, narrowing her eyes as Kyp moved protectively in front of Luke's prone body. "Let me take him back, Kyp. You don't understand what's going on. You can't understand."

"Mara, this is ridiculous," Kyp responded, shaking his head. "He needs psychiatric help. And now, unfortunately, he needs medical help as well, but that's my fault and I take responsibility for it. But he's going to get the best help only if he comes back with us."

"He's getting everything he needs right where he is," Mara stated firmly, standing and settling easily into a combat stance. She moved to her right and Kyp followed her closely. Mara paused for a second, ignoring the blaster bolts, the explosions, the smoke, people dying, people becoming heroes and betrayers. She felt the Force flow around her and smiled. Kyp had never once defeated her in a sparring match, and the Force was with her today.

—

She darted quickly to the left, Kyp once again following her, but when she stopped, she used the Force to keep his attention focused to the left, even as she switched back to the right again. It only took Kyp a second to realize what she had done and block her out, but not before Mara closed the distance between them and aimed a side kick at his exposed flank. Kyp turned with the blow, minimizing its impact. He used the spin to get his lightsaber between Mara and Luke, forcing her to stop and parry.

Mara fell back a step, carefully reminding herself that Kyp was one of the best fighting Jedi, excluding Luke. But not the best. You've seen him practice, you've sparred with him countless times. You've heard Luke give him advice to overcome his weaknesses, and even delivered some of your own. You already know how to bring him down, you just haven't seen it yet. The Force would not have led you here just to be defeated.

—

"Know this, Kyp Durren. Luke is everything to me. I don't want to hurt you, but if you get in the way of my helping him I will use whatever means necessary to stop you. So don't say I didn't warn

you," Mara added, squaring herself up, knowing that Kyp would be coming in with a retaliation strike soon.

"Yeah, well I got news for you, Mara," Kyp said, and Mara just caught him subtly digging his feet into the sand for better traction when he finally did decide to strike. "I care about Luke too, and so do a lot of people on \_ my side. Luke needs his friends right now, not just you."\_

—

Mara smiled grimly as she sensed a familiar presence approaching on another speeder. "Is that what Leia told you? That I'm the only friend Luke's got right now? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but here comes \_ one \_of them right now." She jumped back, giving Camie lots of room to get at Kyp. She swung out with her blast stick as she flew past, but Kyp just managed to parry the blow with his lightsaber, cutting off the tip of the stick. Camie threw the now useless weapon to the side, and spun her speeder around, pulling out her blaster. Too late, it seemed, as Leia already had her's out; she aimed at the exposed fuel tank and fired. It was a direct hit, the blast enough to propel Camie through the air and land with a sick thud against the sand.\_\_\_\_

—

"\_ Camie!"\_

—

Mara turned her shocked expression from Camie's crumpled form to Fixer's anguished face. He stopped his speeder abruptly, almost flipping it. Windy and Deacon were right behind him; they stopped in a slightly less suicidal fashion and pulled out their blaster rifles to cover Fixer as he ran to his fallen wife.

"Camie? Camie, love, wake up! Camie! Emperor's black bones, no!" Fixer wailed as his hands gingerly probed Camie's neck and found it snapped. He searched desperately for a pulse but there was none to be found. Her sightless eyes were turned towards him as her last breath brushed past her lips. Fixer's breath caught in his throat, almost strangling him until he let it out in one haggard cry. "Caaaaaaammmmmiiiiieee! "\_

—

"Fixer, get out of here!" Mara shouted, flickering her eyes between the tragic scene behind her and the foe in front of her. "Get out of here or you might end up joining her!"

"She's right Fixer! We gotta get out of here and pull back! We have to withdraw, the Reps are kicking our ass," Windy said urgently, trying to pull Fixer from Camie's still warm body.

Fixer shook his head, shoving Windy away. He closed Camie's eyes and then tenderly kissed each eyelid, before turning blazing eyes on Leia and pulled out his blaster. "You go. Deak, get everyone out or we'll all die. I got something to do for Camie . . . and for Luke."



"Fixer, no!" Mara shouted, running after him as he bolted towards Leia.    Leia was too far away to hear anything that was said; all she saw was that one of the rebel leaders charging at her with a not completely sane expression on his face as he aimed his blaster.    Without hesitating she fired, hitting him in the chest.    The force of the bolt was enough to spin Fixer around before he collapsed.

Mara fell to her knees beside him, Windy joining her as they helped prop him up.    Deacon knelt beside Windy and tore off a strip of his baggy shirt to try and stem the flow of blood coming from Fixer's chest. Fixer choked, coughed, and then spit out some blood. He looked at Windy and gripped his friend's hand with the strength of death.

"Well, guys, this might be over, but hey, at least we can say we all went down together," Fixer wheezed, feeling his world begin to dim.

Deacon smiled sadly.    "Just like we always said we would when we were kids.    Though I don't quite think this is the way we all imagined it."

"Maybe Wormie did," Fixer muttered, his body gradually going limp as he lost all feeling.    "I kinda missed him being that stupid, naive, idealistic kid he used to be.    But at least he's here too."    Fixer sighed, seemingly quite satisfied with that last observation as he closed his eyes and passed over to the Great Beyond.

They lowered Fixer's body back to the sand he had lived on all his life, and then Windy and Deacon bowed their heads in mourning, oblivious to the war around them.    Mara looked at Fixer's peaceful face, and then looked at Camie, and then Luke.    She stood, fighting the rage that threatened to engulf her.    They were losing everything.    Fixer and Camie were dead, the chances that the rest of them would get out without being captured or killed were next to none, and the rebels were losing badly without Luke to guide them.    Mara could hear the shouts of victory over distant Republic comlinks.    She could see around her the surging Republic and Imperial forces, working together as they had never before to defeat a common enemy: public uprising.    Wedge wouldn't let them retreat.    Now that he had the upper hand, he would make sure that there wouldn't be enough people that escaped to continue the rebellion.

Mara looked at Kyp; he had moved with her, though he had kept a safe distance.    The way they stood now, he not only blocked her from getting to Luke, he blocked her from getting to Leia as well, and suddenly that jumped right up on her priority list.

Letting out a ragged battle cry, Mara charged Kyp, igniting her ice blue lightsaber again with a \_ snap-hiss.    Kyp parried just in time, struggling to keep up as Mara's blade flashed around him.    The sheer magnitude of Mara's determination to get to Leia drove Kyp backward; Mara held nothing back.    Deacon and Windy opened up on Leia and Han, forcing them to duck behind the barricade again before they could offer Kyp any assistance.\_

—

"Great stars!    Has Mara lost it?" Han exclaimed, pulling Leia

behind him and warily getting ready to fire, uneasy about having Mara and Kyp fighting viciously right in the middle of the cross fire.

Leia shook her head, pulling out her comlink. "I don't know, and quite frankly I don't want to find out." "I'm calling for help."

"Good idea," Han commented, wincing as Mara's blade cut deeply into Kyp's leg. Kyp hissed in pain, submitting another precious step. Mara's blade fizzled through the hot air, sweat pouring down her body, and yet as she fought her anger dissipated filled her with a strange calm. Luke had been right, it would all be over after this, and what she did now would decide what would happen. She had been given a choice and she had made it, hate it as she might latter on. The Force was flowing to her and she took full advantage of it.

Finally Kyp gave her the opening she had been looking for; with a deft downward stroke she cut his lightsaber handle in two. She turned her's off and tossed it to the side, and then proceeded to slam her fist as hard as she could into Kyp's stomach. The blow knocked the air from his lungs and he staggered to his knees. Pivoting on her left foot, she cracked her right heel across Kyp's face. He fell the rest of the way to the sand, groaning as he groggily tried to get back up. Mara had already begun to recall her lightsaber when she heard the sound of many running feet coming towards them. Turning around with her lightsaber activated once again, she saw a squadron of stormtroopers run into the clearing.

"Freeze!" the lieutenant in charge shouted, leveling his blaster carbine at Deacon and Windy. "Surrender and you won't be harmed!"

"Yeah, right! We have more to lose by giving up than by fighting," Windy snarled, turned his blaster on the stormtroopers. "Fixer and Camie were willing to die for what they believe, and I won't insult them by doing any different!" Windy opened up on the stormtroopers and Deacon joined him, shouting his agreement. Mara shouted for them to stop but soon Windy shared the same fate as Fixer and Camie, and Deacon was slumped against the front of the barricade, clutching the burning hole in his abdomen as he was surrounded by stormtroopers. They were ignoring Mara for now, she hadn't fired on them and she had a lightsaber; the stormtroopers assumed she was a Jedi there to help with the battle.

Smiling grimly, Mara started to turn to face Leia.

But she had forgotten her sister-in-law's almost perfect aim.

The blaster bolt struck her in the shoulder, hitting her so hard it lifted her up in the air and threw her beyond where Kyp was still trying to get up. Her lightsaber flew from her grip as Mara fought to stay conscious. Sand had splattered into the wound, making the throbbing pain sting even more. She could feel hot blood run down her arm and breast as her vision became tainted with red. Then Han was kneeling over her, he was shouting something at her but she couldn't hear him. She wondered, almost absently, if the bolt had penetrated her lung. It all of a sudden seemed harder for her to

breathe. Â She knew Han was still shouting, but it all seemed so distant. Â She felt something press against the wound and she hissed in pain, but even that felt somewhat disconnected. Â All she could think of as she finally blacked out was why had she been so sure she would win?Â Why had the Force failed her when she needed it most?

Why had she let herself fail  
Luke?

---

---

---

End  
file.